U + ME

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U + ME

by Deos

Summary

This is Hitoshi's first impression of Bakugou:

Kinda cute.

This is Hitoshi's second impression of Bakugou:

God, what an asshole.

Notes

For my dear fren, Merry Christmas! This story is held together with washi tape and desperate prayers, I'm sorry in advance, I have no clue what I'm doing

(This story's premise is based on Seinfeld's Soup Nazi skit, in case anyone was wondering)

Credit goes to Zoidwick for the restaurant name 'The Spice Bomb'!

If you wanna get in my story headspace, feel free to listen: U + Me =

Also, I don't even know what to say, but the wonderful theeggoman has made some amazing fanart for U + Me, check it out here AND here, and go give them a like/share/follow/your firstborn child!

See the end of the work for more notes

You and me we're just fine

One million invisible lines

Out your head and into mine

July

This is Hitoshi's first impression of Bakugou:

Kinda cute.

This is Hitoshi's second impression of Bakugou:

God, what an asshole.

"What the hell did you just say?"

It's Saturday. Lunchtime. Denki had dragged him to some little hole-in-the-wall restaurant Hitoshi had never heard of: *The Spice Bomb*. His first thought: *yikes.* It was a run-down brick building painted entirely black but for the name. Inside: one greeter, one man behind the serving counter, one man at the register. Ten or so small tables scattered around a cramped dining area.

There was a line of people that stretched almost to the door, which boded well. But that was strange too. Nobody talked. Nobody even glanced at their phones. They were silent, clutching their wallets and filing up to the counter like condemned prisoners ascending the gallows.

Hitoshi had followed them, and at the front he'd understood why no one spoke. They didn't have to. The same thing went into the containers; one meal, no choices.

Ugh. Really?

He'd trailed Denki and received his food, mildly annoyed. His friend

had made no mention of this, and he kind of resented paying for a meal he wasn't even sure he'd like, but whatever. All he wanted was some mayo for the half-sandwich on his tray, which looked a little dry.

“Do you have any mayo?” he'd asked.

And that’s when things went pear-shaped.

The wild-haired cook behind the serving counter is staring at him like Hitoshi has just asked for his firstborn son. He's the owner. Hitoshi knows because there's a little tag pinned to his apron that says as much. Owner-cook had been silent the entire time he'd been there up until that moment, but the guy's resting bitch face should've tipped Hitoshi off to possible trouble.

No such luck.

Hitoshi repeats his request, ignoring the way the guy's face has pinched. The people in the line behind him shift, and Denki, standing near the register, looks at him nervously. Why? What the hell is going on?

The cook’s finger points rudely at him, then whips towards the exit. "Get out."

What?

"Are you serious?" Hitoshi says. Something tugs at his memory. Denki had babbled the whole way over here about this place, and he’d tuned most of it out, but he does have the vague recollection that there was something particular about the cook. Or was it that the cook *was* particular? Either way, this goes way beyond particular, it's straight neurotic.

"You deaf or just stupid? I said *get out!"*

Wow. This is really too much to be just about mayo. The guy has some kind of complex. *Fascinating.* He'd read about stuff like this but never thought he'd see a narcissistic tantrum in the wild.

"Shinsou…" Denki whines at him out of the corner of his mouth. He hasn't even handed his money over to the cashier but is wringing it in his hands, squirming like a dog. "C'mon, let's go. People are staring!"

Wait. Denki is on the *cook's* side? Hitoshi turns to stare at his friend

and catches a glimpse of wide eyes. A man seated in the dining area is gaping at them, but at Hitoshi's look, he turns his face back towards his food.

Hitoshi doesn't move.

"Are you with him?" The cook turns on Denki. Poor, dumb Denki, who doesn't have an ounce of self-preservation, nods. "Then you can get the hell out too!"

Denki flinches and cowers. He begins edging towards the door, but Hitoshi has had enough. He isn't going to let him *or* Denki be treated like this.

“Hey, cut it out.”

Stepping towards the cook, he has no real plan. He isn't going to square off in the middle of the diner and he isn't going to use his quirk, so he isn't sure why getting closer is a *good* idea, but maybe—

Something taps his shoulder gently.

"Um, I'm sorry for the trouble," a soft voice says, "but could you please leave?"

It's the green-haired kid who had greeted them. He'd welcomed them with a smile — and is in fact, still smiling — but the way it strains around the edges makes him look even more anxious than Denki.

All the fight flows out of Hitoshi. He can't turn his anger on this cherub-faced kid. Pivoting on his heel, he trails Denki out of the diner.

Before the door can swing fully shut, a petulant howl follows them onto the street:

"Your ass is banned for a week!"

Hitoshi can't help but snort. Is that supposed to be some kind of *punishment?*

He walks off, not looking back. Still, it grates. Getting kicked out of a diner on his fucking *birthday?* Okay, maybe it’s a week after his birthday, but the meal was supposed to be Denki’s treat, and here they are food-less and—

"Aw, Hitoshi! I really wanted to try that place!"

This is all Sero's fault.

He'd been the one to put the stupid diner on Denki's radar, and then of course Denki had dragged Hitoshi along. Normally it's fine. It's happened tens of times before; Denki gets a wild hair to do something, and, because he can't seem to say no, Hitoshi gets roped in. No big deal. As long as it doesn't tank his grades or get in the way of class, he's game.

But normally Denki's obsessions don't infect *him*.

He's standing outside the diner again, sweating in the sun and squinting at his phone. He's found something useful.

"C'mon, man! Did you listen to anything *I said? You have to follow the rules if you wanna eat there!"*

No, he hadn't, actually. Hitoshi has the bad habit of tuning Denki out once his yammering reaches a certain cadence. He'd heard the name of the place and the location, and everything after that had been obscured by more important thoughts; namely, wondering whether his paper was due this weekend or next weekend.

As it turns out, this place has a fan site. Freaking seriously?

It's nothing special. Whoever has put it together is clearly a novice, but it'll serve his purposes. Turns out there are *rules* for eating at this ridiculous place, which read as follows:

1. You get what's served.
2. No complaining.
3. No refunds.

He snorts to himself and stuffs his phone in his pocket. Well, apparently that explains the debacle of last week, but really? Throwing him out over *mayo?* He shouldn't bother giving the guy any of his hard-earned money.

Only one thing: Hitoshi *hates* losing. And that's what avoiding this place feels like. So, he walks inside.

Same as last time, the green-haired kid hurries over to greet him.

“Welcome back!” he says in a bright whisper, bowing slightly. Well, *he* remembers Hitoshi. Maybe that bodes well for the cook remembering him too; Hitoshi wants to see the look on his face when he realizes he didn’t scare Hitoshi off.

He nods to the kid and gets in line.

It moves steadily. He can’t fault the owner for expediency, even if he can fault him for everything else.

When he’s at the front of the line Hitoshi grabs a tray to indicate that he’s eating in, then shuffles along the steel serving shelf, trailing the patron in front. The cook’s eyes are on him before Hitoshi comes abreast of him, and Hitoshi gives him his best shit-eating grin but says nothing. *Can’t kick me out if I follow the rules*.

The cook sneers, but ladles something orange and chunky into a bowl and slams it down onto Hitoshi’s tray, followed by a half-sandwich, napkin-wrapped silverware, and an empty cup. Oh, yeah. Hitoshi is remembered.

The silent confrontation lasts all of five seconds before the guy in front of Hitoshi has finished paying and it’s his turn at the register. He hands a spectacled man exact change — counting out every coin silently— then trails out into the seating area. There’s a little sign on the wall that states ‘sit at any available table’ and so he does, taking a seat that affords him a view of the serving line. He wants the cook to see him eating. Taking up space in *his* diner, when there’s nothing he can do about it.

Hitoshi has half a mind to just toss the food — really rub it in the guy’s face — but he’s hungry, and well, he paid good money for it. Might as well eat… whatever this is.

What *is* it?

He pokes at the soup. It looks like puke. Whatever it is it’s nothing he’s had before, and but for the red chunks that are probably tomatoes, nothing in there looks recognizable. Or appetizing. Zero points for presentation; at least if it’s disgusting he won’t feel bad throwing it away.

And there’s nothing left to do but try it. Hitoshi scoops up a spoonful and shoves it in his mouth.

It’s cold. He wasn’t expecting that. Cold and thick, the temperature

refreshing in the heat even though the texture is giving him the willies —

And then the flavor hits.

Hitoshi slinks out of the diner twenty minutes later — cursing himself for not being brave enough to get closer to the line to read the menu of the day, he'd been too caught up in his own head to notice it on the way in — belly full and no longer sweating. He feels like he's just had a cool dip in the pool.

Goddammit, the soup *is* fucking delicious.

He doesn't tell Denki about his visit. Or about his subsequent visit the following week. Or the week after that. Which is just as well, because Denki tells him *all* about his visit. He'd tagged along with Sero the day before Hitoshi had made his own venture in.

"I can't believe you don't want to go!" he says for the fiftieth time. "The soup is — it's just — so damn good!"

"It's just soup, Denks," Hitoshi replies. He's sprawled on the floor reading through some particularly dense pages of a text — or trying to. It would be a lot easier without Denki pacing around, rehashing something he already knows.

"It's not *just soup,* Shinsou! It's like — like a religious *experience!*"

Denki's voice reaches such a pitch that Bagheera, who has spent the last hour napping on the couch, opens baleful green eyes and glares at him.

"Uh-huh." Is all Hitoshi says.

"Well, I'm going there for lunch with Jirou. You sure you're not game?"

"Nope. I gotta finish this reading."

Denki just throws his hands up and leaves. He'll be gone the rest of the day, Hitoshi knows; after lunch he gets together with his D&D group, which means the apartment is all his until ten o'clock.

At half-past five he closes his book, pockets his phone and wallet, and heads for the door. The diner is open until seven.

Bagheera blinks at him.

"Don't look at me like that," Hitoshi tells him. It's like he knows.

Bagheera is *definitely* staring him down as he closes the door.

September

He's been going to the diner every weekend for a month and a half now. In that time, he's seen twelve other people get thrown out. It's good to know he isn't the only one; at least the cook doesn't discriminate.

Whatever little rivalry ever existed between them hasn't faded. Hitoshi still grins like an asshole as he goes by, and the cook still puts his bowl down on the tray so hard that sometimes Hitoshi gets his thumbs wet with slopped soup. It feels like a game of chicken: who will crack first?

Well, it's not going to be him, even if he isn't angry anymore. The food's too good, it's cheap, and, now that he understands the cook's weird brand of justice, he isn't even pissed that he and Denki were thrown out. *Now* he's here for the game… and because the cook isn't half-bad to look at. Getting under the guy's skin is just a bonus; dinner *and* a show.

He's begun to learn. There's a pattern to the meals: cream stews on rainy days, chilled soups on hotter days, spicy tomato bisques on days the cook seems especially pissy. He feels a little bit like a meteorologist. Or maybe he's leaning too hard on his degree, looking for patterns that aren't there. They did say at the beginning of classes to not go around psychoanalyzing people.

It's two months into his little routine when something changes.

Hitoshi enters the diner and gets in line. He's shuffling forward, trailing the lady in front of him and wondering why something seems so off when he realizes: the green-haired kid didn't greet him.

He looks around, curious but not bothered. The kid is usually all over the place, busing tables, greeting, escorting disgraced patrons out — he's probably got a million roles behind the scenes Hitoshi has never noticed, and has gotten caught up in them.

He makes his way through the line, smirking like a fool all the while, but this time the cook barely even looks at him. His bowl is put on his tray with the same force as everyone else's, and in between Hitoshi and the next patron he hollers over his shoulder: "E! I need some more fuckin' sandwiches! Get em' out to me!"

From somewhere in the back comes an affirmative yell.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Hitoshi takes a seat. Eats, watching the cook slam out orders like a drill sergeant, and then during a lull, race to the back and return with a tray of sandwiches.

A door in the back of the restaurant opens. A burly guy with a ridiculously huge red topknot comes out, buses the dirty tables haphazardly and then nearly drops the overflowing bin in his haste. He runs to the back and then returns to wipe the tables, then disappears.

Hitoshi has never seen him before. Huh. Makes sense that the cook would have help; all that food doesn't come from nowhere.

By the frazzled air coming off both Topknot and the cook, Hitoshi can guess that the green-haired kid is absent today. This diner must operate on a pretty damn precarious balance if this is the product of one missing worker. And yet, it's kind of amazing. Unless the cook has a small army squirreled back there, this place is run by only four people.

He finishes his meal. God, maybe the cook slipped something into it. What else could explain the fact that he feels *pity* for such an asshole?

Actually, he feels worse for the guy in the back. The cook is more verbal today than Hitoshi has ever seen him, barking out orders for food left and right.

Hitoshi must be going crazy. That's gotta be the only explanation for why, the next time the red-haired guy runs out, he intercepts him and says:

"Do you want any help?"

The guy must think so too. He blinks at Hitoshi like he's spoken a foreign language. Hitoshi tries again.

"I mean, I bused tables through high school. If you want help with that, I've got time."

What is the nonsense coming out of his mouth? He almost hopes the cook hears him talking and throws him out.

But, no such luck. Topknot smiles, exposing a row of alarmingly sharp teeth.

"Really? Dude, thanks so much!"

And then Hitoshi is whisked into the back. Topknot points out the sink for the dirty dishes and the washer, the bucket of disinfectant for the table rag, hands him the bin and then disappears around a corner with another cry of *"Thanks, dude! I owe you!"*

And, what is he to do except get to it?

This is, without a doubt, the stupidest decision he's ever made.

One hour in and the worst is over. That doesn't stop him from regretting it. Either he's misremembered his high school experience or the diner is on a different level; can he seriously be this tired from *busing?*

God. Every time he went out there it seemed like there was a new table to clear. And even once he'd cleared them, he hadn't been content to just stop there. Oh, no. The sink full of dishes had stared at him accusingly, and of course he'd wound up rinsing them, then stacking them in the washer. And then the washer had been full, and he couldn't just *leave* it like that, so he'd had to hunt down the detergent and start it, and then there had been *more* tables to bus, and then the dishes were clean and he'd burned his arms getting them out

of the washer too soon, and—

And, he's a fucking idiot.

But the diner has blessedly short evening hours, and he's bused the last table by seven-thirty. When he carries those dishes to the sink, Topknot swans into the room, channeling the kind of Denki energy that makes Hitoshi tired just to look at.

"Nice job, dude! You didn't have to do all that, but I'm impressed that you kept up!"

"Mmm," Hitoshi says, rubbing the scrubber over a bowl. Holy crap, how can he feel this *old?* He's only twenty-two!

"Who the hell are you talking to, Eijirou?"

And suddenly he's not tired anymore.

The stomping quality of the footsteps that suddenly enter the room have him looking intently down at the sink. He's scrubbing the same spot over and over, too focused on playing nonchalant to even notice that the bowl is spotless. His neck prickles. Maybe it was stupid of him to keep antagonizing the cook—

"What the fuck?!"

He fully expects to feel a hand on the back of his shirt — oh, shit, that's right, somewhere along the line he'd shucked off his jacket, now there's nothing to soften a blow — but, there's nothing. Just another outburst.

"E, you got five seconds to tell me why *he* is in my kitchen before I blow your damn face off."

Okay, okay, that sounds like a legitimate threat.

Hitoshi turns, dish still in hand, and smiles winningly. "I volunteered," he says, and dammit, he can't help that his normal smile kind of looks like an ironic grin, "got a problem with that?"

The trap has been laid, and the cook falls right into it.

"Hell yes I have a fucking problem with it!"

He feels the trap spring. There's an invisible hook in his mind now, ready to catch the cook the second Hitoshi deems him dangerous.

Though, from the look of it, it seems as though Topknot — Eijirou? — is getting the brunt of the cook's ire, not him.

"—can't just *let* people into *my* damn kitchen!"

The cook is raging at Topknot, who has his hands up placating, but is still smiling.

"But Bakugou, he said he wanted to help—"

"I don't give a shit if he said he was the fucking Queen of England! I don't want strangers in my fucking kitchen!"

And then he *does* round on Hitoshi.

"And *you*." The cook is suddenly in his face, scant centimeters between him and the bowl clutched in Hitoshi's wet hands. "I don't know what your game is, but you're banned for a fucking month."

Up close, it's impossible to miss how very white and even those bared teeth are. Or the fact that his eyes are vibrantly red. How had he never noticed that?

"That seems unfair, Bakugou."

A new voice. It's the cashier. With all four of them here, the room is beginning to feel cramped, and not only because the cashier is as big as Topknot. It's not exactly a spacious place.

The cashier gestures to Hitoshi. "He's been a regular the past seven weeks. Minus the first instance, he's been polite and followed the rules. And he worked tirelessly tonight. You shouldn't ban him for being kind."

Hitoshi likes this guy. He may have the severe look of a librarian, but he's got a good head on his shoulders. And he doesn't even flinch when the cook gets in his face and starts yapping: "Are you fucking kidding me, Iida? You've seen him mugging at me every fucking time he comes in—"

They spend the next ten minutes arguing. Or rather, Hitoshi watches, hands chilling then drying, as the cook rakes Topknot and the cashier over, then ultimately relents.

"Fine, you're not banned," he spits, snatching the bowl out of Hitoshi's hands. "Now get the fuck out."

So, no *thanks* from him, then. But he gets one from the cashier — Iida, and a third from Eijirou, who escorts him from the building.

"Don't let him scare you off, dude. He's just stressed with Izuku gone," Eijirou says, clapping a broad hand on Hitoshi's back and sparking a small cascade of aches. "Thanks for all the help tonight. I'm Kirishima, by the way. Kirishima Eijirou."

As if a little barking could scare Hitoshi off. Hah.

Hitoshi heads home, tired, sore, and with only one thought clanging in his head:

His name is Bakugou.

Because he's a masochist, Hitoshi goes back the next day. The green-haired kid (Izuku?) is still gone. Bakugou does at least give him a sneer when he goes by, and Hitoshi smiles right back. He nods at the cashier — *Iida, his name is Iida* — as he hands over his card, and is quite sure that's resignation in those dark eyes, but Iida says nothing.

He eats. And thinks that Bakugou looks his way at least once during the course of the night, but can't be sure. Behind the counter it's a whirlwind of movement again with Bakugou demanding more food, more clean dishes, and kicking out a woman who came up to complain that her soup was too salty.

"If you don't like it, then don't fucking eat it!" he snarls, and tosses a to-go container at her. "Get out!"

Whoof.

When Kirishima hustles out to collect dishes, Hitoshi catches his eye. Kirishima hands him the bin.

He buses again that night, and is sure Bakugou knows about it long before closing time, if the vehement grumbling on the other side of the wall means anything. And when the last patron is gone, Bakugou chews his ass out again.

"The fuck are you hanging around for, Eyebags?"

This time Hitoshi has no bowl to protect himself, and Bakugou is close enough that the tip of his spiky hair could poke Hitoshi's eye out if he so much as sneezes.

"I'm here out of the goodness of my heart," Hitoshi replies.

Wrong. He's here because he's probably got a screw loose, and because the food is fucking bomb. But he won't tell Bakugou that.

"Well I don't need your fucking *charity*, so go find somewhere else to sniff around," Bakugou says, and shoulder-checks him when he turns to go.

This time it's Iida who escorts him out.

"Is he this sweet to everyone, or is it just me?" Hitoshi jokes.

"Don't take anything he says personally," Iida says as the door closes behind them. "The swelling under your eyes isn't that noticeable."

Wait, what?

"He can be… difficult," Iida continues, as if Hitoshi isn't *really* self-conscious about his damn eyes now, "but your help is appreciated."

"What happened to the other guy? Izuku, or whatever his name is?"

"He broke his hand. He'll be off of work for a few weeks." Iida answers briskly and matter-of-factly, as though Izuku had gone on vacation instead of suffering a serious medical event.

"What, really?"

Iida nods.

"Do you guys have any other staff to come in and cover for him?"

But he already knows the answer, even before Iida opens his mouth.

"No."

"So… would you… want my help for a few weeks?"

Why is he doing this? *Why?* He has classes and exams and papers and all the other normal life shit, so *why* is he offering to work, unpaid, at the restaurant of a guy who seems like he'd happily see Hitoshi strung up in the street?

Iida regards him seriously over the rim of his glasses. "You would do that?"

Yes, apparently he would. "Well, I'd have to fit it around my classes, but I can come when I'm available…"

"You're a college student?"

"I am."

Iida looks away, seemingly thinking. The guy has a really great face for that. All square-jawed and severe, nothing at all to Bakugou's pointy chin and more vulpine features.

"It occurs to me that I've never even asked your name," Iida says, dragging Hitoshi out of his thoughts. "How very rude of me, I apologize. I am Iida Tenya, the finance manager for The Spice Bomb."

He bows. Wow. *Way* formal. It's like he's trying to compensate for Bakugou's rudeness. How the heck did such polar opposites get connected?

"Uh, I'm Shinsou Hitoshi," Hitoshi says, bowing himself. "Nice to meet you."

Mid-bow, he gets an unobstructed look at Iida's legs. Straight black slacks that fall to the toes of his polished shoes; totally normal, except for the fact that his calves look like freaking boulders. Hitoshi wonders if that has anything to do with his quirk.

"Well, Shinsou," Iida is saying, "I'm afraid I can't afford to pay you for your work. But I will compensate you with free meals, and send you home with whatever extras Kirishima doesn't take."

Well, he hadn't really expected to be paid in the first place, but he's not stupid enough to pass up free food. "Deal."

They exchange numbers. He leaves Iida with the promise that he'll text his availability as soon as he checks the diner hours against his coursework, and the niggling idea that he's biting off *way* more than he should.

October

He’s bitten off way more than he should.

Stupid, really. He’d been managing a perfectly nice balance, and now he’s blown it all to hell. He can’t help it though. He’s curious.

There are so many things he wants to know. About Bakugou. About the diner. Hell, even about Kirishima and Iida. He’ll eat Bagheera’s catnip mouse if any of them are over twenty-four, but here they’re running a successful restaurant — which apparently has been going over two years strong — and Shinsou’s still figuring out what he wants to do with his fucking life.

And of course, he’s curious about their quirks.

He’s got a pretty good idea of what Kirishima’s is. Something to do with his skin. How else could he manage handling the bowls right out of the wash? The heat spewing out of the washer steams up the whole room, but Kirishima plucks scalding dishes from its maw like it’s no big deal, and Hitoshi is quite sure his fingers don’t normally look so claw-like.

Iida’s is obviously in his legs. Only a bodybuilder might have calves that big, but that doesn't explain the strange shape of them. Maybe he can run really fast. If so, it might make sense for *him* to be busing while Hitoshi is on the register, but he doubts Bakugou would let him handle the money.

Bakugou.

He wonders about Bakugou most of all.

What's his story? Did he really start this restaurant? Does he really plan and cook all the dishes?

“Oh, yeah, he makes all the soup himself,” Kirishima says when Hitoshi poses the last question.

It’s two-thirty on the first Saturday he's has worked since he volunteered. The shop closes at two and reopens at five, ostensibly to give them time to prepare for the dinner rush. They’ve snuck out the back door. After the sweat he’s worked up, the cool fall air feels positively heavenly.

“Gets up early to go to the market, then he and Dek— I mean, Izuku

spend the mornings cooking. It's pretty crazy. Dude's a wizard in the kitchen." Kirishima shakes his hair out of the bun, combing it over to one side to expose his sweaty neck.

"Izuku or Bakugou?"

"Bakugou. Izuku is just there to help with food prep. Bakugou does all the cooking."

Helping Bakugou prep food. The kid must be a saint. He tells Kirishima as much, and Kirishima laughs.

"Yeah. He's a little hard to get at first, but Bakugou ain't a bad guy. And he and Izuku go way back. They've known each other since like, childhood."

Hm. Maybe Izuku is the one he should be asking these questions. "Really? They've stuck together that long?" And then, something alarming occurs to him: "Are they like…"

He makes a hand-clasping gesture. Kirishima laughs. "Oh, no! No way, Izuku has a girlfriend. Real nice girl, name's Uraraka. He's just always been a good friend to Bakugou. I think it was him that convinced Bakugou to give this diner a shot."

He notices that Kirishima only mentioned Izuku's girlfriend, not Bakugou's. The urge to push for more is strong, but he ignores it.

"So, since Izuku is gone, that means he's had to do all the meal prep himself?"

Kirishima see-saws his hand. "Kinda. Iida and I come in to help open at nine, but he doesn't always like letting us handle the ingredients. He's pretty particular."

They fall into silence. Hitoshi takes a deep breath and then blows it out slowly, considering. It would be really, really dumb of him to do it. Even think about it. He's got morning classes — that he's mostly been skipping — and plenty to do. And Denki's been noticing his absence. He'd accused Hitoshi of smelling like cream stew one evening, and Hitoshi had lied and said he'd volunteered at a soup kitchen.

"Do you think Bakugou would want some help?"

He expects Kirishima to give him a quick answer, but doesn't receive

one. Instead Kirishima looks him over.

“Uh…” he says, sounding sheepish. “Well, I mean… it’s really nice of you to offer and all, but I’m not really sure.”

“Why not?”

Now he actually *looks* sheepish, fiddling with a lock of hair. “I, uh—it’s just, no offense man, but I think you kinda wind him up.”

“Oh, I definitely wind him up,” Hitoshi agrees. “Do you think if I stopped doing it that he’d accept the offer?”

Kirishima squints at him. “You’ve been *trying* to piss him off?”

“Well… just a little. ”

Kirishima punches him in the ribs. Ow. Friendly punches still hurt when you’re built like Kirishima is. “Dude, so you *are* secretly an asshole! I thought Bakugou was just being dramatic!”

“He *is* dramatic. But I’m also an asshole.”

That earns a laugh, and Kirishima’s laugh is infectious. Hitoshi laughs too. How strange life is. He’s gone almost the whole of his college career clinging to the same safe bubble: same friends, same housing, same major, and now he’s here. Hitoshi doesn’t know anything about Kirishima’s history, his likes, or even his favorite color, but he thinks he may have found a friend in this man.

The moment is short-lived. The door next to them bangs open, making him jump.

“E! Quit bullshitting and help me cut these fucking vegetables before I dock your damn paycheck!”

Kirishima doesn’t even flinch, just nods and heads back inside, smiling and obedient. He’s just like Denki in that way. Big, happy, golden retriever of a man.

The door is still open. Bakugou is glaring at him, and Hitoshi waves. He manages to keep the grin off his face, remembering Kirishima’s words. *I think you kinda wind him up*.

“And you, quit fucking distracting him!”

The door slams shut.

Hitoshi sighs and smiles up at the dull gray sky.

There's something heavy and warm purring on his face. Hitoshi breathes in a noseful of black, tickling fur and pushes Bagheera off before his sneeze can startle the cat.

It's Monday morning. Only two classes today, both of which he's planning to skip. He checks his watch. Five-thirty. *Ugh.*

Hitoshi drags himself out of bed, contemplates a shower, then decides, fuck it. Not worth the wet hair in this weather. He washes his face and shaves, spending a few bleary sleepy minutes warming his toes on the air vents until Bagheera's insistent meows drag him out of the bathroom. He feeds his needy cat, eats a bowl of cereal, and is out the door without Denki any the wiser.

It's six thirty when he makes it to the diner. Dark, and cold as fuck. There's nobody here. He huddles near the side of the building, face tucked into the neck of his hood and debating about just curling into a ball, potential witnesses be damned. Ugh. What he wouldn't give for a fire quirk right now. Why did he ever think this was a good idea?

At around six forty-five he hears movement, but doesn't bother to look up. He'd committed to the fetal position ten minutes ago and he'll be damned if he sacrifices this precious warmth for some random passer-by.

"The hell are you doing here, Eyebags?"

Something kicks his shoe. Now he wants to look up, but his chin is so far into the neck of his hoodie that it's hard to extricate it gracefully.

Another poke. "I know it's you. I can see your fucking purple hair you troll."

Hitoshi finally extracts himself and gets to his feet, smiling at a bag-laden Bakugou. Bakugou is glaring at him. Oh, shit. He's not supposed to smile, is he? Antagonizing face and all that.

"I'm here to help," he says.

Bakugou makes a rude sound and pushes past him to the back door.

Hitoshi follows.

“I don’t need your fucking help,” is the first thing Bakugou says when they’re inside.

“No one ever said you did.”

“Then why the hell are you *here?”*

Hitoshi is eyeing the stove. Huge, ancient, definitely gas-powered. That probably pumps out heat like a furnace when it gets going. How soon before Bakugou begins using it? Even inside it’s pretty damn cold.

“Because I want to be,” he replies.

Sometimes he’s pretty certain he was a cat in a previous life. That might explain his affinity for them, and his penchant for gravitating towards people that plainly don’t want him around. Clearly he hasn’t learned his lesson.

Curiosity killed the cat.

Bakugou just makes a disgusted sound and drops the bags on the floor. He reaches around Hitoshi to flick the lights on and becomes a whirlwind of movement, slapping down cutting boards and knives, filling huge pots with water and plopping them onto burners, slinging an array of bowls onto the counters, then donning a hairnet and yellowed apron. Hitoshi pulls back the corner of one bag to peek inside. Something green and plastic-wrapped that might be herbs, and tomatoes. A *lot* of tomatoes.

"Don't fucking touch anything!"

He snatches his hand back.

There's a stainless steel refrigerator that Bakugou stuffs most of the perishables into. Everything else is shoved onto shelves or laid on the cutting boards. When Bakugo rolls up his sleeves and picks up a cleaver, Hitoshi takes one big step back. Bakugou he can handle. Bakugou with a knife? Maybe not.

The chicken carcass on the cutting board is neatly flayed open. Bakugou carves into the pink flesh with quick, graceful flicks of the blade, separating muscle from bone, popping legs and wings off with such ease that's a little alarming to witness.

Looking closer, it's easier to see why. Bakugou is *jacked*. Not in the way Iida or Kirishima are; he's not burly, but lithe as a dancer. Muscles ripple like cables beneath the pale flesh of his forearms.

The knife stops moving. "If you're just going to fucking gawk, get out."

Hitoshi grins. He just can't win. "So, which is it? Do you want me to help or to not touch anything?"

To his credit, Bakugou does not yell at him. He just glowers murderously until Hitoshi looks away, then drags him over to the counter.

"Hairnet and apron. I don't want any of your damn hair in the food."

He puts them on. The hairnet barely fits; he might have to try to pull his hair up like Kirishima.

"Now cut these up."

There's a pile of vegetables next to one of the cutting boards. Onions, carrots, celery, a fuckload of tomatoes. What is he making?

"Alright."

He's only just reached for the knife when Bakugou barks at him to wash his hands. So he does. The water is fucking *freezing*. When he picks up the knife again his hands are stiff and clumsy with cold, but he pulls an onion gamely to him and lifts the blade — only for Bakugou to stop him again.

"Pull up your sleeves unless you wanna drag onion juice and every other damn thing home."

He does.

Thank God he knows at least *some* basic meal prep. He halves the onion before realizing that he has no clue how big Bakugou wants the pieces. He asks.

"Just dice em', they're going into the stock so it doesn't matter as long as they're not whole damn rings."

Stock. Okay.

He begins to chop, trying to ignore the man hovering at his shoulder like an evil specter. It becomes easier; two minutes in, all he's thinking

about is the stinging in his eyes and whether or not rubbing the tears away will make it better or worse, when rough fingers suddenly pluck the knife out of his hand.

"Don't slam the fucking blade up and down, you're going to dull the edge. *Rock* it."

Hitoshi rubs his streaming eyes and squints at Bakugou. "What?"

A grumpy *tsk*. Bakugou hip-checks him out of the way and begins to work the onion over. Twenty seconds later it's chopped and scraped into one of the pots.

Wow. He gets what *rock* means now. In Bakugou's hands, the tip of the knife never leaves the cutting board.

"Oh, okay." He tries again.

The heat at his back lingers for another two minutes, then finally disappears. It's only when the rapid cadence of the other knife starts up that he finally begins to relax.

It's short-lived.

"You gotta peel the carrots before you cut them, dumbass! Do you want dirt in the fucking food?"

"Don't chop so much of the ends off!"

"*Wash* the damn cutting board before you put the herbs on it!"

Once, when he's moving too slowly, Bakugou even comes over and takes the knife from him, dicing with a speed that has Hitoshi wondering how the hell Bakugou hasn't ever accidentally served his fingertips along with the soup. He tries to note the technique — okay, fingers curled in, knuckles a shield between him and the knife — but is distracted by the flex of Bakugou's forearms. Huh. There are scars on both of his wrists—

And then Bakugou turns and almost barrels right into him.

"Stop standing so fucking close!"

A shoulder bumps him rudely out of the way. Hitoshi gets the faintest whiff of fresh pine scent — deodorant? — as Bakugou breezes by, dumping herbs into the now-simmering stock.

"Sorry," he says absently, and smiles.

Somehow, they both survive the morning. Probably because Kirishima and Iida turn up around nine to help. Hitoshi is ushered into the washing room an hour later with a bowl of (reluctantly served) soup and thanked for his assistance — that's how he's choosing to interpret "*get the hell out of my way, Eyebags"*, anyway — and eats his free meal over the sink, rolling the first spoonful across his tongue to savor the flavor combination. Damn. Bakugou may be a colossal asshole, but that man can *cook*.

He spoons down his soup slowly, listening to the sound of pots and pans being moved about, the low rumble of conversation and crinkle of wax paper as sandwiches are assembled and wrapped.

Kirishima comes in as he's licking his spoon clean.

"Thanks for all your help, dude." He slings a burly arm over Hitoshi's shoulder, and Hitoshi gags when the spoon hits the back of his tongue. "Oh, shit, sorry man. Just wanted to say I appreciate all you're doing for us. You really don't have to."

"No, I don't," Hitoshi agrees, slipping out from under Kirishima's arm to begin filling the sink with hot soapy water.

Kirishima blinks at him. Clearly not the answer he was expecting. "Uh… then why are you doing it?"

Hitoshi looks around, then crooks a conspiratory finger. Kirishima brings his head closer. Hand cupped around his mouth, Hitoshi whispers the secret into one silver-studded ear:

"I will do *anything* for free food."

Then lifts his hands in defense when Kirishima flings soap suds at him.

He’s made it through the first day as unofficial meal-prepper. Then the first week.

He’s not sure how to feel about it.

Actually, he doesn’t have time to feel any particular way about it: he’s *exhausted.* Hitoshi is no early bird. And, though he’s normally always on top of his classes, he’s begun to let his studies slip. There’s an exam coming up that he *has* to study for, and so it’s with regret that he texts Iida that he won’t be in to help the following Thursday and Friday so he can spend some time cramming and doing laundry.

Bagheera comes to sit next to him when he’s doing just that, the end of his pencil jammed between his teeth as he memorizes Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for what must be the tenth time and scribbles out the definitions of every kind of case methodology the book mentions. He downs coffee. Crashes into bed. Wakes the next day to do it all over again.

Then, in a haze of exhaustion, the test is over. He thinks he's passed, but won't know until next week. Damn evening exams, it's too late for him to swing by the restaurant.

When he catches sight of himself in the mirror, he thinks it's probably a good thing.

Hitoshi pokes at the purplish rings under his eyes. Yeesh. Eye *bags*? He's got a whole damn luggage line weighing him down. Not a good look. Maybe he should invest in one of those cold eye pack things; he'd contemplated it after Iida's remark about them, but hadn't pulled the trigger. Nothing for it tonight. Some decent sleep oughta clear the worst of it up before he goes in tomorrow—

Wait. Why does he care what he looks like?

Hitoshi returns to the diner the following morning to find that Bakugou has already beaten him there.

He lets himself in. Bakugou pauses between stuffing cartons into the fridge to snarl:

"Where the hell have *you* been?"

Hitoshi unclips the strap of his trapper hat (what? It's warm) and lets a slow smile unfold. "Had to study for an exam. Did you miss me?"

Bakugou goes red. A vein pops out on his temple; that can't mean good things for his blood pressure.

Then something strange happens. There's a chorus of muffled snapping sounds from somewhere, and when Hitoshi turns his head toward the sound, he finds himself staring at Bakugou's clenched fists.

Bakugou abruptly turns away. Hitoshi comes to the conclusion that he might have heard Bakugou's knuckles cracking, but doesn't have time to worry about it because Hurricane Bakugou has arrived in full fury.

He gets to work.

November

Hitoshi thinks he might be getting good at this whole 'helping' thing. The amount Bakugou corrects him seems to dwindle with each passing day, and once or twice Bakugou even turns on the radio.

Chopping vegetables to hard rock at the ass-crack of dawn isn't exactly his idea of fun, but there's a kind of peace that settles over him as he falls into the rhythm that's unquantifiable. It's like… it's like… well, shit. He doesn't know what it's like. It's not like normal cooking and it's not like doing chores, and it sure as hell isn't like hanging out with a friend, but it's not unpleasant. It's almost like… like using his quirk.

Yeah. That feels right. It's the monotony of repetition mixed with a subtle, alien hyper-awareness of another person sharing his headspace.

Sheesh, he is thinking about this *way* too much.

Whatever it is, it's got all the durability of a soap bubble. He'll feel it one second and then the next, Bakugou is there, razing his ass over the way he peels garlic. And then it's *really* over once Kirishima and Iida arrive.

Hitoshi was spot on with his first impression of them. Those two are good guys.

Sure, Iida's stuffy and a bit literal, but he's also sensible. Stalwart. The dude is built like a rock and has all the dependability of one.

He takes an eager interest in Hitoshi and his studies, and quickly becomes concerned when Hitoshi lets it slip that he's skipping classes.

"Are you sure that's wise?"

Iida pauses in the middle of sweeping, frowning.

"Yeah, I'm doing fine. They're not difficult, most of the material I've covered at the surface-level in past classes anyway," Hitoshi says. It's the truth. Mostly.

The broom begins to move again.

"What is your degree in?"

"Psychology."

"Is that what you want to be? A psychologist?"

Hitoshi scrubs a rag over a dried spot of soup on one of the tables. "No, not really."

"A psychiatrist?"

God, just the thought of four more years of school makes him want to drop out. "No way."

"What, then?"

The stupid stain is *really* stubborn. He has to chip at it with his nail before it begins to come up. "I'm not really sure."

Iida somehow manages to exude disapproval without saying a word.

Hitoshi can guess what he's thinking, and it's not because he's spent three years studying the human mind. It's just a logical conclusion. *You're nearly done with college and don't know what you want to do?* And then, following that: *why are you getting a degree if you don't know that you'll use it?*

He's spared any follow-up questions when Kirishima bounces in,

drying his hands on his apron. Apparently he's been eavesdropping. "That's totally fine, dude. I didn't know what I wanted to do either!"

"You went to college?" Hitoshi asks.

"Nah. Helped at my dad's construction business on and off through high school, then Bakugou offered me a job and I've been working for him ever since." Kirishima takes a seat at one of the tables.

"Is working here what both of you plan to keep doing?"

That earns a look passed between both of them. Iida's voice is quieter when he speaks, as though he's afraid of being overheard.

"No. I'd like to apply to a graduate hero course. I was in the hero course at UA until my brother was injured, then I dropped out to help my family adjust. He had to move home, and there were a lot of modifications and physical therapy appointments to take him to, and coordination to keep his agency running…" He trails off.

Kirishima is nodding. "That must've been hard, dude." He claps Iida on the back. "But I know you can do it! You got us and your family backing you!

Iida pushes up his glasses, seemingly embarrassed. "I… thank you, Kirishima. I'm going to be very behind, compared to where my brother was, but I'd like to carry on the family legacy."

It's quiet then. The silence heavy and awkward, the way things always are when someone bares more of their heart than anyone expects. His fault. Hitoshi is the only stranger here, and he'd asked the question. It feels inconsiderate to say anything else, but Hitoshi can sense Iida wants them to move on, so he breaks the brittle moment by asking:

"What about you, Kirishima? Do you have any plans?"

"Mmmm…" Kirishima hums, thinking. He strips off his hairnet and pulls his hair down from its topknot, shaking it out onto his shoulders as he considers. "Maybe open up a construction business like my old man."

Okay, he would never have guessed that. With that mane of hair, Hitoshi had pegged Kirishima as more of an artistic type.

Kirishima has his chin propped on his fist, staring dreamily at nothing. "I think I'd be good at it. And if I'm not, they can at least use me to

break up the concrete." He chuckles.

Hitoshi raises an eyebrow. "Something to do with your quirk?"

"Yeah. Guess I never really told you, huh? My quirk is Harden. Can harden any part of my body." He demonstrates by holding up an arm. In an instant his flesh thickens into a horror of jags and cracks like parched earth, fingertips becoming claws. Then, just as quickly, the skin melts back into softness. "But… I dunno.” His eyes are distant, the dreaminess softer, sadder. “I always wanted to be a hero."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Took the entrance exams and everything. Didn't make it though. I failed the written test,” Kirishima says.

It’s a queer feeling, knowing everyone here once shared the same dream. It probably shouldn’t be. Wanting to be a hero is a pretty ubiquitous desire; at least half of the kids in his high school class had applied to either UA, Shiketsu or Ketsubutsu, after all. But hearing this stirs up the ghosts of feelings he’d thought long dead — he can’t decide whether it’s uncomfortable or exciting.

"You could do like Iida is doing and apply to a hero University,” he says, wanting to encourage Kirishima. “The entrance exams might be different, but I bet we could help—"

The door in the back crashes open. "Are you assholes gonna keep jawing all night or are you gonna help fuckin' close?"

Iida holds up his broom pointedly. The rest of them get back to work, and the conversation is effectively dead.

It's Monday morning. Cold and damp. Hitoshi hates the combination. Despite the fact that he's freezing his ass off he's still sweating beneath his coat, and it's with relief that he notes the faint light glowing through the diner's shuttered windows. Bakugou is already here.

He lets himself in the back and is met with a flood of warmth and music. And—

"Oh, hello!" the green-haired boy says brightly, putting down his knife.

"You must be Shinsou!"

What.

Izuku is back.

The way Iida had talked, Hitoshi thought he'd have at least another week before being pushed out. Not so, apparently.

"Yeah, the recommendations are usually four to six weeks," Izuku admits when Hitoshi mentions it. "But it was just some simple fractures this time so I went to a support hero and had the healing sped along."

This time he says, like he makes a regular thing if it.

"I told you not to go to any damn hacks," Bakugou growls over the music. "Just fucking stay home and heal like a normal person!"

"She's not a hack, Kacchan!"

Kacchan?

"Will you stop fucking calling me that?"

Izuku, baby-faced, freckled Izuku, completely ignores Bakugou and turns to Hitoshi.

"Thank you for helping while I was gone," he says, beaming. "And Kacchan thanks you too. We couldn't have done it without you."

"Uh, yes we fucking *could have!"*

"No problem," Hitoshi says, smiling reflexively. It feels fake. He scratches at his neck to disguise it, looking down at his feet. This is it? It's over, just like that? "Well, guess you're all good here then. Glad your hand's healed up, uh—"

He realizes he doesn't actually know Izuku's full name.

"Oh— I'm Izuku! Midoriya Izuku!"

"Midoriya." *God that sounds weird after only knowing him as Izuku. "* Glad you're feeling better. Guess I'll see you around."

He fully expects that to earn some snarky remark from Bakugou; maybe *like I'd wanna see your ugly mug anywhere* or *good fucking riddance* — but Bakugou is silent. Hitoshi slips his trapper hat back on.

"Um — you don't have to go, Shinsou."

It's Izuku who stops him. Reaching out to snag his elbow, and Hitoshi meets his wide, earnest gaze with surprise.

"My hand — it's not at a hundred percent yet, and gets pretty sore if I use it too much. It would help me a lot if you stayed."

Bakugou snorts. "Trying to pawn off your fucking work, Deku?"

Somehow the bite in his voice seems… warmer.

Hitoshi looks down at Izuku. A short man with the face of a child, but forearms every bit as muscular as Bakugou's. Forearms littered with scars.

He stays.

He… kind of regrets it at first.

It's uncomfortable. Hitoshi has never liked third-wheeling, and even though Kirishima *says* that Izuku has a girlfriend, he has his doubts. Izuku and Bakugou fight like an old married couple.

"Don't fucking tell him to cut them like that!

"It doesn't matter Kacchan! They're going into the food processor eventually anyway—"

"Yes it does! If they're that big they're gonna cook unevenly!"

But what the situation gives him in sheer awkwardness, it makes up for with Izuku, who is, as Hitoshi had suspected, an absolute fucking saint.

He hands over the knife to Hitoshi quickly, explaining the preparation process and then the cooking process in low murmurs. He shows Hitoshi the most efficient ways to cut and pare and peel. He points out the different herbs and seasonings and their flavor profiles, as well as what seasonings make their soups unique. And he never stops smiling.

"Stop fucking telling him all the recipes, dumbass!" Bakugou snarls, stomping over in the middle of one such explanation. "Do you *want* us to have competition?!"

Us, he says. Scoring a bright chalk line on the ground. Because Hitoshi is not *us,* despite all his time here, he's *them.*

"Shinsou wouldn't do that, Kacchan," Izuku says, pacifying.

For once, Hitoshi decides to vocalize. "Yeah. The soup's good, but not *that* good."

Vibrant red eyes pin him where he stands. Izuku laughs nervously. *Whoops*. Probably shouldn't have said that in front of the guy who basically co-owns the place.

"No offense," he tacks on.

After that, the silences are a little more awkward.

Hitoshi, fool that he is, decides that, an hour later, things aren't awkward enough. Trying to make conversation, he asks Izuku how he broke his hand.

"Same way he's broken it every other time. Overestimating his dumb, shrimpy body," Bakugou snarks before Izuku can answer.

"Kacchan, that's not very nice!"

"It's fucking *true."*

Every other time?

Izuku flushes. Oh. He'd said that aloud.

"Sorry, it's none of my business. Ignore me," Hitoshi says, returning to dicing, but Izuki shakes his head.

"No, it's fine. I'd be curious too," he says softly. He's stirring one of the pots with a long wooden spoon but abandons it to flex his right arm.

"Uh… you see, my quirk is super strength. Only it doesn't give me super durability, so if I overexert my power, I end up hurting myself." He smiles; a small, embarrassed curl of his lips. "This time I tried to stop a mugger. But when I swung at him, I missed and hit a wall."

Bakugou makes a derisive noise. "If you're gonna play the fucking hero you should at least learn how to fight."

Both Hitoshi and Izuki ignore him.

"Wow. Well, good on you for trying to help," Hitoshi says. He wouldn't have pegged Izuku as the kind of guy to solve problems with his fists. That baby face is deceiving.

Izuku shrugs. "I was just trying to do the right thing."

That night Hitoshi spends some time poking through journal articles. He's heard of quirk dysphoria, but Izuku's story had him curious about quirk-body incompatibility. It's a popular hypothesis — quirks have existed for the tiniest fraction of human history, there's no way a change so sudden jives with millions of years of human evolution — but it remains only that. His research leads him down, down, down the twisting rabbit hole that dissolves into a warren of study proposals, case reports, and budding research. No clear answers.

Of course.

It's been several months, but Hitoshi thinks Bakugou might finally be getting used to him.

At least, that's what he's choosing to attribute the substantial decrease in corrective outbursts and swearing to, and not the fact that Izuku has taught him a lot.

He's still not friendly, but that's ok. Hitoshi's come to believe that the Bakugou version of *friendly* doesn't fit any standard human definition. Just look at the way he treats his 'friends'.

They're closing for the evening. Hitoshi is filling a bucket with fresh water for the mop while Kirishima stacks clean dishes. Today had been particularly notable; involving Hitoshi's introduction to several

new swear words when Kirishima had dropped a whole tray of sandwiches during the afternoon rush.

"Nah, doesn't bother me," Kirishima says when Hitoshi voices his concern. "You're just seeing the worst of him here. He's better outside."

"You guys hang out outside of here?"

That's a little surprising. Hitoshi would've thought that, friends or not, they might've had enough of each other being at work all the time.

"Yeah. Mostly holidays and stuff, cuz we're usually here most other days, but he's a good dude. He's fair. Gave me this job after I quit construction, and helped me out when I was training to retake the hero exams."

That instantly has Hitoshi's attention. "He trained you?"

Kirishima pinches rows of clean trays between his clawed fingers, pulling them out of the washer's steaming maw. "Uh-huh. Hand-to-hand combat, agility drills, that kind of stuff. He's wicked good at strategy. I guess you could say we helped each other, since training with me probably helped him too—"

Heavy footsteps come around the corner, and Kirishima's mouth snaps shut. Bakugou glares at them suspiciously as he makes his way out, presumably to the bathroom, but doesn't say anything.

After he's gone, Hitoshi waits for Kirishima to continue, but Kirishima is not forthcoming. He prompts him. "Hero training together? Were you both in hero courses?"

Kirishima sets the last of the trays onto the stack.

"Yeah. Well, *he* was. But it's not really my place to talk about that." He turns bright red eyes on Hitoshi. Eyes lighter than the deep, arterial red of Bakugou's. "If you wanna know about Bakugou, you should ask him."

Hitoshi plays his surprise off with a laugh. "And get my head chewed off? No thanks."

Kirishima looks thoughtful. "Nah, I don't think he would."

And this is getting *way* too close for Hitoshi's comfort. He sets the full bucket on the floor and then grabs the dustpan and broom, heading

out to sweep the dining room. His heart is beating too fast.

Damn it. Damn his curiosity. There's no way he's being subtle about it if *Kirishima* has picked up on it. *Shit.*

He does not ask Kirishima any more.

December

"Are you alright, man?"

Hitoshi slides his textbook down off the bridge of his nose to see Denki staring at him, munching a cream biscuit. He grunts.

"That good, huh?"

It's two weeks until winter break, and Hitoshi is drowning.

Now that Izuku is back, he's really got no excuse to do anything but focus on his coursework. They don't need him at the diner. And he's slacked so much with his reading that, at this point, he's got to focus on his studies or his grades *will* be in danger.

But he's distracted.

He misses being at the restaurant. Weird as it is to say it, being there has become second nature. It isn't even that hard to get up at five-thirty anymore. And…

He's made friends. At least, to a point. Can he really call them that? Iida, Kirishima and Izuku — they all talk to him. Have let him into their lives. Expressed their hopes and dreams to him, and even some of their fears. They're the first friends he's had that are actually *his,* not just friends of Denki's who associate with him.

But he’s not sure he’s *their* friend. Because as much of themselves as they’ve given to him, he’s given almost nothing back. He’s very skilled at turning conversations away from himself, and it’s always worked well because people tend to like to talk about themselves. Call it an old defense mechanism. Consequently, they know as much about him as he knows about Bakugou. And it’s starting to get to him.

Bakugou.

Hitoshi *really* wants to know Bakugou.

If you wanna know about Bakugou, you should ask him.

That's just the thing though; he's *terrible* at just *talking.* Once a conversation has started? Piece of cake. One question is the grease that turns the wheel. He's always been good at playing off other people. But actually setting things in motion? It's like trying to shift a boulder with a twig.

He'd been hoping that his time spent at the diner might ease things between them. Most people can't spend time around each other without *some* curiosity, but Bakugou is as standoffish as a feral cat. It's kind of frustrating.

"You really should cut back on your part-time job, man," Denki tells him.

That's been his excuse for his absences for the last month, and he plans to milk it for all it's worth. Does that make him a shitty friend? Probably. It isn't that he wants to keep Denki *away* per say, he's just not sure he can take the endless taunting when Denki learns that Hitoshi had gone back to the restaurant he'd supposedly scorned.

"They know I've got finals coming up in January," Hitoshi mumbles. "Gonna cut my hours after break, but I think I'll go full time until Christmas. Earn some extra cash."

If only. More like 'waste his damn time panting over a guy who'd cheerfully string his guts up in the street'. Why, oh *why* does he do this to himself? Freud would have a fucking field day.

Flopping down on the floor next to him, Denki fires up the PS4. "Wish I had your dedication," he says, then crams the rest of the cream biscuit into his mouth.

Hitoshi puts the book back over his face. *Fuck everything.*

"Oh, Kacchan, look! It finally came in!"

Hitoshi looks over to see Izuku pulling something thick and red out of a box. He pauses in the middle of mopping to watch as Izuku shakes the thing out, and it unfolds like an accordion right onto the ground.

Bakugou snatches the end of it up. “Don’t drag it all over the floor, dammit!”

Hitoshi catches a flash of white against the red. Izuku takes the other end of what Hitoshi realizes is a banner and pulls it taut, turning its face towards him and Kirishima. “See?”

There in jagged white characters: *The Spice Bomb*. The twin black cannonballs flanking the hiragana really sell it.

“Edgy,” Hitoshi says. “I like it.”

Bakugou’s eyes flash. He starts to open his mouth, but Izuku speaks first.

“Isn’t it cool? Kacchan designed it!” He sighs happily. “It’ll be so nice to have a proper sign! We won’t have to keep painting the building!”

He turns sparkling green eyes on Hitoshi. “Will you help Kacchan hang it up?”

Which is how he ends up climbing up a rickety ladder onto the roof.

Peeking up through the hatch, Hitoshi is hit by a gust of cold wind that vibrates the flaps on his hat. God, it’s cold. He pulls himself up and waits for Bakugou to throw the hatch shut before he unfolds the banner. Bad idea. It undulates in the breeze, and Bakugou swears at him when he has to chase the tail of the fabric.

They wrangle the banner into place. There are old fasteners where a sign had previously hung, but they’re not suited for banner’s grommets. Thankfully the banner had come with polyester cord, which they cut to length with Bakugou’s pocket knife and then knot to the fasteners. Bakugou tugs at the sign to check its integrity. Hitoshi double checks that it’s been hung right-side up. Perfect.

He trails Bakugou back to the hatch, staring out across the roof. The night is blue-black velvet studded with the weak yellow glow of the street lights, and the shadows are long and jagged. It’s a lonely, unlovely sight, but he's drawn all the same.

Thunk. Thunk.

A strange sound. Bakugou is yanking at the hatch, which doesn't budge.

“What the hell?” Another yank. The lock bumps against metal with another dull *thunk*. “Who the fuck locked this?”

That’s odd. He hadn’t seen Bakugou unlock it, but Hitoshi is sure the hatch would’ve had to be unlocked for them to go through.

“*Deku!”* He jumps when Bakugou suddenly bellows at the top of his lungs. “*Unlock the fucking hatch!”*

Silence.

Hitoshi wonders if the others can even hear them. He sure as heck can’t hear anything over the wind, and he has no idea how thick the roof is. He waits, listening. After another minute Bakugou hollers again, this time slamming his foot down on top of the hatch plate.

“*Oi! Idiots! Unlock the damn—”*

The squeak of the back door opening silences him. From the ground Izuku peers up at them, wide-eyed and apologetic.

“Sorry, Kacchan!” he calls up. “I think the lock jiggled shut when you closed the door! We’re trying to find the key right now! Hold tight!”

“You dumbass, the keys are where they fucking always ar—”

But Izuku is already hurrying back inside.

Bakugou huffs out an angry breath. Hitoshi can’t blame him. It’s fucking cold up here even with his coat on, and Bakugou hadn’t put on anything warm. He doesn’t want them to be trapped any longer than they have to be.

He wanders around the edges of the building, looking down. Concrete all the way around, no fences or adjacent walls to leverage their way down with. Quite a drop, but not impossible. If he hung off the edge of the roof, it’s probably less than a two meter fall.

Hitoshi has a brief but vivid mental image of both his ankles shattering on the pavement, and shudders. Okay, maybe better to not chance it.

“If those fuckers take more than five minutes, I’m going down there to look for myself,” Bakugou snarls from Hitoshi’s right. He’s poised on

the roof's edge, glaring fearlessly at the ground like he plans to dive right off. It makes Hitoshi nervous.

"You asking for a broken leg?" he says.

Bakugou snorts derisively. "I can make it down without breaking like a fuckin' twig. I'm not Deku."

He speaks with such certainty that Hitoshi wonders if he's done it before.

He helped me out when I was training for the hero exams.

"Well, I sure couldn't, so I'm staying put."

Hitoshi backs away from the edge and tucks himself against the AC unit, using it as a windbreak. He'll chance the wait. With a cellphone in his pocket, he's hardly out of options. If worst comes to worst, some firefighters will have a lame story to regale their coworkers with by the end of the night.

Bakugou is still perched on the roof's lip, a pale windswept figure striking against the blackness of the night. For one long second Hitoshi thinks:

He's actually going to jump

Then:

"This is fuckin' bullshit," Bakugou grumbles as he squats down next to Hitoshi.

"You can say that again."

They wait.

For the first minute Hitoshi is too focused on pulling his arms inside his jacket to realize that they're alone. *They are alone.* And without the demands of the kitchen pulling Bakugou's attention away, now is his chance to quit being a damn yellowbelly and actually try to start a conversation. But it's cold, and Bakugou is already annoyed, and he probably doesn't want to talk to Hitoshi in the first place, and—

"Could you really make it down?" Hitoshi forces the words out before his doubts drown them.

Red eyes glance at him, then away. "Yeah."

Okay. Okay, he's got the ball rolling. *Keep going.*

"How?"

He's imagining some parkour-style tuck and rolling, or else perhaps a creative use of a dumpster. That gymnast's body must see some use outside of the kitchen, and it wouldn't surprise him at all if Bakugou's hobbies are death-defying or dangerous.

"My quirk."

He tries not to sound too eager. "Your quirk?"

"What are you, a damn parrot? Yes, my quirk."

"What's your quirk?" And then, because he can sense some reluctance: "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"It's not a fuckin' secret," Bakugou mutters. "I can make explosions."

Explosions?

No way. That's too ironic to be real. Hitoshi's muffled laugh bursts out his nose, and Bakugou elbows him sharply. "I'm not joking!"

Hitoshi rocks back from the blow, close enough that his jacket brushes Bakugou's arm. "I know you're not. I wasn't laughing about that, it was — never mind. Sorry."

He smiles at Bakugou's suspicious glare, taking in the sight of him with fresh eyes. Wild spikes of hair. Red irises. A hair-trigger temper. Maybe that quirk theorist was right; form follows function.

But if that's right, what does it say about Hitoshi?

His smile vanishes. "Explosions, huh? Damn. That's pretty awesome. Way cooler than my quirk."

His heart is in his throat. Bakugou's suspicious look doesn't fade. Of course it doesn't. Hitoshi has established himself as a smartass; Bakugou is waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When Hitoshi says nothing else, the hot glare trickles away. Bakugou blows into his hands to warm them, and Hitoshi feels momentary relief.

"No shit. It's better than ninety-nine percent of the dumb powers out

there," Bakugou says. He puffs another breath, white fog curling up from the gaps in his fingers.

There's that arrogance again. Bakugou's own personal brand of confidence. It's strangely refreshing, in a weird way; there's an honest quality to it that feels like more than plain narcissism — probably because Bakugou can back everything up with skill. Which doesn't make him less of a monumental dick, it just makes him a competent dick.

Hitoshi wonders what he can do with his quirk.

The wind moans. If there's a furious search going on below them, Hitoshi cannot hear it. He curls his toes in his shoes, certain they're already going numb.

"Bet I can guess what *your* lame-ass quirk is."

He didn't think it was possible to feel even colder, but the anxiety that seizes his gut sends a chill right down his spine. There's a brief but wild impulse to lie. Pretend he has no quirk. But that would be stupid; one look at his driver's license would sink him.

He manages a weak "Oh?"

"Yeah." Bakugou's mouth twists in a wicked grin. "You don't need to sleep."

"...No."

"So that's just your face. Bad fuckin' luck."

This time it's he that takes the opportunity to bump Bakugou. "And you call *me* an asshole."

"I call it like I see it."

He wishes they could stay like this. Just like this. Strung on the razor's edge of camaraderie, freezing in the dark December night. But the seconds tick by, one heartbeat closer to the moment Bakugou will open his mouth and ask the question Hitoshi's been dreading — so he decides to head it off.

"Nah. My quirk is nothing useful like that." He steps into the empty air. "...I can brainwash people."

It's not precisely accurate, but close enough. He's tried for years to

think of some palatable way to say ‘I can control people with my mind’, but there really is no good way to do it. Because it *isn’t* a palatable power. It isn’t neat. It isn’t clean. It isn’t flashy or awesome or any of the other pretty adjectives people use to describe their quirks, because his power isn’t something *he* wields. It’s something that wields other people.

“Yeah right.”

His eyes snap to Bakugou. “Huh?”

“Try again, Eyebags.”

Bakugou doesn’t believe him.

Hitoshi doesn’t know what to say. He hadn’t anticipated this, and yet it makes perfect sense; smartass Hitoshi reaping what he’s sown.

“No, that’s really it.”

Like a boulder from a trebuchet, he can see the retort hurtling at him from a kilometer away, but is helpless to avoid it. Bakugou sneers at him and says: “Prove it.”

"No," Hitoshi says through a throat that feels like a straw.

"Why the hell not?"

Inside his jacket his hands are balled into fists. "It's not something I like to use if I don't have to."

"You *scared?* "

The taunt plows right to the heart of the matter. Hitoshi *is* scared. But Bakugou is assuming wrong — he’s not scared of *using* his quirk, he’s scared of the aftermath.

Were it Kirishima or even Izuku he might. They of such warm, trusting natures would forgive him. And even though he would never brainwash any of them into doing something awful or unforgivable, Hitoshi knows the loss of control, however brief, can shake a person to their core.

But of course he can’t tell Bakugou that. He’d perceive it as Hitoshi doubting his capability, and double down. Which leaves him with only one choice:

Vulnerability.

“Yeah, a little.”

Bakugou’s lip curls with incredulity, but Hitoshi ignores it. “Not like I’m scared of my quirk, but once people know about it they treat me differently. They see it as” — *Dark. A tool for taking. Criminal.* — “the perfect power for a villain to have. Which… kinda sucks. So it’s better for me to not use it at all.”

Because I always wanted to be a hero.

That truth sits on the back of his tongue, unuttered. He’s okay with trusting some things to Bakugou, but he’s not sure he could take the scorn that would surely follow such a declaration.

You? A Hero? You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me.

“Yeah, well people are fuckin’ morons. Don’t take any shit from extras who don’t even fuckin’ know you.”

Hitoshi looks over slowly. He can’t quite believe his ears. Bakugou has his arms curled around his knees, head pillowed between, not looking at Hitoshi.

Bakugou giving *advice?*

Bakugou *not judging him?*

Something inside him thaws. He tucks his chin back into his jacket and rolls his shoulders forward to disguise the smile that threatens to burst across his face. “Aw, so you *do* have a heart."

"Oh my god, you damn—"

The hatch pops open with a rusty shriek. "Hey, dudes! It's unlocked now!"

He's spared another jab because they both bolt for the opening. Hitoshi's quirk isn't mentioned again.

And just like that, all his progress with Bakugou is put on ice. The

holidays are upon them. He's got a number of assignments due before winter break starts, on top of gifts to wrap and cards to write.

He's sprawled on the couch trying to finish his latest paper when Denki plops down in the adjacent recliner.

"Still working on that paper?"

Hitoshi clicks on another link. He's hunting for peer-reviewed research to back up his hypothesis. "Yep."

"Ugh. That sucks, dude."

With no papers to write, Denki is essentially coasting toward break. Lucky bastard. It's enough to make Hitoshi wish he'd followed him into music theory.

For a few minutes, the only sound is Hitoshi's mouse.

"...Got any plans for Christmas?"

Damn, why is it so hard to find a study published in the last five years? Hitoshi shuts his laptop, conceding momentary defeat. "Eh, not really. Probably will work up till Christmas Eve and then go home for a few days. You?"

"Probably spend Christmas with Jirou's family and New Year's with mine."

It's the arrangement that's become standard for the last two years. Alternating holidays since Jirou's family lives in outer Musutafu, while Denki's live here.

"I'm planning a pretty sweet New Year's party, if you're gonna be around," Denki says. "My parents usually go to one of my mom's coworker's parties, the house will be ours til two."

Denki's parties. Hitoshi has been to more than a handful of those over the course of his life. They've definitely improved since he started dating Jirou; less shitty beer and a better variety of snacks. He wonders if the diner will be open on New Years.

He wonders what Bakugou will be doing for New Years.

"Yeah, maybe."

If he *does* work that day maybe he can swing by the store after and

pick up some shochu. Jirou may have improved Denki's taste in beer, but Hitoshi still hasn't developed a taste for IPA's.

The recliner squeaks as Denki leans forward. "...Are you alright, dude?"

Hitoshi, startled, looks up. "Yeah, why?"

"Just feels like I haven't been seeing much of you lately."

Denki is doing that finger-wringing thing he always does when he feels awkward. Guilt twists in Hitoshi's stomach. For a supposed best friend he sure as hell has been doing a terrible job of it; he and Kaminari haven't hung out properly in months. Of course he's feeling neglected.

"Sorry, Denks. This part-time job has really been kicking my ass," he says, ashamed at how easily the lie passes his lips. "I'm hoping it'll ease up after the holidays."

Denki nods. Hitoshi casts around for an olive branch, and spots the PS4.

"You want to play a couple rounds of Street Fighter?"

A couple rounds turns into a couple hours turns into a few drinks and a delivery pizza, which turns into Bagheera sprawled across his lap as they rewatch Blade Runner for the tenth time. Fuck it, he'll work on the paper tomorrow, even though he knows his brain is going to be mostly useless mush. Oh well. It's worth it to see Denki happy.

He does not regret losing one night. Does *not*.

A few late-nighters gives him the time he needs to squeeze out the three remaining sources and four remaining pages. Hitoshi submits the paper at two a.m., with twenty-two hours to spare. He plows into his bed and emerges ten hours later feeling sleep-hungover, but more human than he's felt in days, even whistling while he showers.

He's not expected back at the diner for another day. That makes the delight on Izuku's face even sweeter when he walks in.

“Shinsou! You’re done with classes?”

Out of the corner of his eye he can see Bakugou’s head turn toward him. “Yeah. You guys want any help?”

It’s good to be back.

"So Shinsou, what are your plans for Christmas?”

This question again. Hitoshi slides his knife into the top of the red bell pepper and cores it neatly. "Not much. I'll probably go home for a few days to celebrate with my parents, then come back. You?"

Izuku snuffles. Hitoshi doesn't blame him. He's a meter away, but the onion fumes are enough to make Hitoshi's eyes sting from here.

"The same as you. My mom likes to celebrate on Christmas Eve so we'll open presents that evening and do our stockings the following morning before we start delivering plates." He wipes at his streaming eyes. "She likes baking. We make Christmas platters for all our friends and neighbors."

It's nine days before Christmas. Izuku's hand has long been healed, but here Hitoshi is, still chopping vegetables at sunrise. His own choice. Izuku had invited him to continue helping if he'd wanted, since *"six hands are better than four!"*

He hadn't said no, because by now he's used to waking up early.

"Put more snickerdoodles on our plate this year. The old hag likes those," Bakugou grunts.

He's been surly the whole morning since he lost the janken match to decide the radio station. Cheery Christmas tunes filter through the air.

"Okay!"

On his way back from offloading his onions, Izuku whispers to Hitoshi: *"Kacchan loves snickerdoodles."*

"I do not!"

Which means he totally does.

They have the stock going and the peppers roasting. Hitoshi is watching Bakugou mince garlic when Izuku ventures another question.

"What are you doing for New Years?"

It's like a rerun of his conversation with Denki. Hitoshi gives the same noncommittal answer, aware that the movement of Bakugou's knife has slowed.

Izuku nods. "Yeah, when it's just me and my mom, we don't do much. Usually we don't even make it to midnight."

"Fuckin' lame," Bakugou cuts in.

Izuku ignores him. "But this year I'm having a New Years' party! We'd be happy to have you if you want to come!"

"Who wants to go to one of *your* dumb parties, nerd?"

Hitoshi takes one look at Izuku's wide, pleading eyes and makes his decision. "I do."

"Oh, great!" Izuku, supremely pleased, reaches for his phone before realizing his fingertips are still dripping onion juice. "Um, here, let me give you my number. I'll text you my address and the details!"

Izuku's number is saved into his contacts. The first besides Iida's in over two years. As it turns out, he doesn't even have to wait for a text because Izuku's brimming excitement overflows.

"Let me know if there's any special kind of drink you like! We're going to have shochu and sake, vodka, and mixers, and I think Kirishima is bringing beer, but if you don't like any of that Ochaco is going to make punch — uh, cranberry orange, or something like that?"

Uraraka Ochaco, Hitoshi already knows, is Izuku's girlfriend. He's seen her at the diner only once, the week after Izuku returned full-time; she shares Izuku's cherub-faced, sweet demeanor. He bets the two of them drive Bakugou up the wall.

Izuku is still talking. "—and she's also making gyoza and tsukune, and Sato is bringing cake — you haven't met him, he's an *amazing* baker — and I think Shouto is bringing soba… or maybe he's bringing the

cheese ball? *Oh!* Which reminds me, I forgot to ask — are you allergic to anything?”

“Nope, no allergies,” Hitoshi says, amused and mildly alarmed. Izuku’s cadence is reaching an almost incomprehensible speed; it’s a wonder he can talk that fast without gasping.

“Oh, okay, good! Well if there’s any special treat that you like to eat, go ahead and text me it or bring it, if you like! You can never have enough food! But I guess I haven’t told you, I’ve invited some of my old school friends as well! Shouto, Sato and Yaoyorozu I met in school, and you already know Iida and Kirishima. Everyone is allowed to bring a plus-one; I think Iida and Kirishima will be bringing their girlfriends and Shouto will be bringing his boyfriend, you can invite someone too if you want!”

Izuku really is conscientious. Hitoshi notes the inclusivity of the invitation, an open door to a topic they've never broached. He could let it pass by, unacknowledged. But he won't. He's curious about what kind of reaction he'll garner.

"Nah, I don't have anyone to bring. Haven't had much luck in the dating market here."

Bakugou makes a scoffing sound. He's put down his knife, all pretenses of work forgotten.

"That ain't too surprising. You look like you're half dead all the fuckin' time. Gonna be a weird chick who's into *that*." A flick of two fingers at Bakugou's eyes indicates plainly that he's referencing Hitoshi's dark circles.

Hitoshi grins at Bakugou slowly, watching like a hawk from behind heavy lids. "Even if a girl was interested, *I* wouldn't be. So I guess I don't have to worry about scaring them off."

He says it nonchalantly. Like it doesn't matter in the slightest that he's just confessed his orientation. Izuku wouldn't lead him wrong. If Bakugou was going to have a problem with his sexuality, Izuku wouldn't have mentioned anyone's boyfriend at all.

Even so, his palms are sweaty.

Bakugou doesn’t even flinch. He just sneers at Hitoshi like he has tens of times, and turns back to his cutting board.

“Aw, don’t worry about it Shinsou! Kacchan isn't dating anyone either," Izuku says a little *too* innocently.

A beat of silence, then —

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?!”

His suspicion cements in an instant.

He waits until closing, alit with impatience as Izuku chats with Kirishima, then Iida, but finally corners him partway down the sidewalk.

“Oh, Shinsou. Is there something I can help you with—” Izuku starts, but Hitoshi interrupts.

“Are you trying to matchmake Bakugou and I?”

The sheepish look spells his answer. “Uh…”

He can’t decide if he wants to laugh or die of embarrassment. Obviously Izuku has picked up on his interest, which means his crush isn't anywhere as subtle as he’d hoped. If Izuku knows, Bakugou might too. *Shit.*

Izuku must sense his discomfort. “Don’t worry, Shinsou, I don’t think Kacchan knows. It was really hard to pick up on. I wasn’t even sure about it until recently.”

Which just means that Hitoshi himself was what confirmed it. He sighs. “You don’t need to. Matchmake us, I mean.”

“I know I don’t *need* to. It’s just that…” Izuku rubs at his neck, looking at the ground. “Um, sometimes… Kacchan needs a bit of prodding.”

Hitoshi, hopeless fool that he is, can’t resist asking the question that declaration begs. “What makes you think he’d even be interested?”

“Well…” Izuku hums, thoughtful. “He looks at you.”

“...He looks at me.”

“Yeah.” He amends the statement. “You look at each other, but he’s better at looking when you’re not paying attention.”

And is that *hope* he can feel budding in the pit of his stomach? No. Probably just gas. It could explain why his whole body is suddenly

feeling flushed. “So what? People look at each other all the time.”

“That’s true, but not everybody looks at each other’s butts.”

He stares. He cannot *believe* that Izuku said that with a straight face.

Izuku just blinks at him, looking childish and innocent in his red puffer jacket and knitted pom-pom beanie. “What? It’s true.”

Okay. Okay. So *maybe* Bakugou has a little superficial interest he won’t admit to. Big maybe. It still doesn’t mean anything. It’s like browsing a magazine; he’s something nice to look at while Bakugou passes the time. So why the *hell* is his heart trying to leap out of his throat?

“Okay. So he looks,” Hitoshi manages to say without blushing. “That’s fine. You don’t have to try and help him along. If anything is going to happen, I’d like it to happen naturally, okay?”

There. Playing it cool is the right move. That way Izuku won't know how much the revelation has gotten to him.

"Yeah, okay. I understand."

Thank *God* that's settled. He nods to Izuku, muttering his thanks, and waits for Izuku to put in his earbuds before lifting his hand in a wave.

Izuku suddenly pops one earbud out. A tinny melody lingers in the cool air as Hitoshi regards him curiously.

"I really do think you would be good together," Izuku says, strangely solemn. "Kacchan needs someone like you. Anyway, night, Shinsou. See you tomorrow."

And then he walks off.

What the *hell* is he supposed to make of that?

Hitoshi lurches in the following morning too tired to agonize over his new revelation. He'd spent the better part of the evening (and the wee hours of the morning) doing just that. Now he could happily lay down and die. Or sleep for a year. Maybe both.

At least he's found some kind of equilibrium. Last night had been a rollercoaster starting with the sheer drop of ' *holy shit Bakugou may be into me'* and culminating in the underwhelming final destination of '*so what?'*

Yeah. So what.

They're two dudes who barely know each other, brought together by circumstance. He doesn't even know Bakugou's first name. Not that he couldn't find it out — 'Kacchan' is obviously short for *something* and he's sure any of the others would tell him if he asked. That's not the point. The point is, *Bakugou* hasn't told him. If that doesn't spell out the absolute distance between them, he doesn't know what does.

So. *So what.*

It doesn't stop Izuku from trying.

He's not matchmaking anymore, or at least he isn't doing it in a way that's obvious to Hitoshi. Instead he's asking questions. About Hitoshi's studies, his motivations, his hobbies, his likes and dislikes — the kind of friendly 'getting to know you' stuff that any new acquaintance might ask, all conspicuously during the mornings they meal prep together.

Clever. Hitoshi doesn't mind answering.

It's during one of these such questioning sessions that Izuku finally learns about his quirk.

"Brainwashing? Really?" He stops dicing tomatoes, suddenly focused on Hitoshi with laser intensity. "How does it work? Is it like, a suggestion or real mind control? Can you use it on multiple people? What does it feel like when you use—

"Deku!" Bakugou says sharply. "Shut up for one damn second and let him speak!"

Izuku shuts up.

Hitoshi would thank him, but in truth he doesn't mind the questions. Izuku's interest seems pure-hearted, bent more towards the nature of the experience rather than speculations about its unsavory applications. So, he answers. And, when Izuku asks him to *use* his quirk, he pauses instead of immediately refusing.

"Um…"

He's torn. The very same thing he'd denied Bakugou now returns like bad karma.

"He isn't a damn performing monkey," Bakugou snaps. His vigorous scrubbing of the stovetop rattles it until it groans. "If you're gonna ask people to do shit, why don't *you* show *yours* first?"

"Oh! Oh, I'm sorry, that was rude of me, Shinsou.” Izuku, blushing and embarrassed, backtracks so quickly it gives Hitoshi whiplash. “You don't have to use it if you don't want to."’

He considers. Showing Izuku is something he’d already deemed safe; showing Bakugou on the other hand…

One glance toward him shows a conspicuously turned back. But Hitoshi knows he’s listening. Knows he’s interested, because he’s running the sponge over the same spot over and over. Hitoshi would never want to use it on him, but he does want Bakugou to see it too.

"No, it's okay. I can show you. It’s just something I don’t like using on people very much.”

He gives Izuku the same spiel he’d given Bakugou. At the end, Izuku’s face crumples with pity. “Oh, Shinsou, that’s awful!”

“It’s understandable,” he corrects. Really, given the common associations, can he blame anyone for their first impression of his power? Mad scientists, magic spells — no one ever uses mind control for *good*.

“That doesn’t make it any less bad! That must have been horrible for you growing up.”

He shrugs. Hitoshi has long come to expect people’s tactlessness.

Later, after the diner is closed, he beckons Izuku into the empty dining room, trailed by an interested Iida and Kirishima, and an apparently indifferent Bakugou. They stand in the space between tables, face-to-face.

“I want you to know that I’m not going to ask you to do anything that would hurt you,” he says.

Izuku nods, showing nothing but absolute trust. “I know you

wouldn't."

He turns to the others. "You can break my quirk with a shock. Something like cold water or a slap will give him back control if he wants it before I stop it."

Bakugou smirks crookedly. "Howabout it, Deku? Need someone over there to smack some sense into ya?"

"Hah hah, Kacchan."

His stomach gives a slow, queasy roll as he turns back to Izuku. There will be no way for any of them to know if Izuku has a problem before Hitoshi releases him — not unless he manages to break Hitoshi's quirk himself.

No one has ever broken through.

Make it quick.

"Are you excited for the New Years' party, Izuku?" he asks.

A sunny grin unfolds on Izuku's face. "Oh, I am *so* excited! You're going to have—"

The instant Hitoshi hooks him, the grin freezes. Izuku's face slackens. Before him is a mannequin in Izuku's skin, and a pit opens in Hitoshi's stomach. He pulls a chair out from the nearest table.

"Izuku, sit in this chair."

Izuku sits.

"Now get up."

Izuku follows his commands fluidly, not a hint of tremor or rigidity. He isn't fighting.

"Wave to me."

Izuku waves.

"Now flip me off."

Izuku raises his middle finger, unflinching. If there were any question about whether or not Hitoshi is actually controlling him, he hopes that answers it. No way can he imagine Izuku doing that normally.

Hitoshi dissolves his hold. Animation floods back into Izuku's face, and he lowers his middle finger hastily. The swimmy feeling in Hitoshi's gut remains. He hadn't asked much. But, now faced with the reality, he wonders if even this little bit is enough to shake Izuku's trust.

Izuku's eyes widen. "Wow!" He looks down at his hand, then smiles, and a boulder slides off Hitoshi's chest. "That was cool! Weird, but cool! Though… I feel bad about doing that last bit."

He's never heard it called 'cool' before. "Don't worry about it. You were just following my commands."

"What did you experience?" Iida asks.

"It was… I don't know, I guess it felt a little like possession, or something?" Izuku flexes his fingers, as though testing his control of them. "Like I knew and heard everything, but my body just started doing stuff without me."

His testimony sounds pretty much like Denki's. And, like Denki, he doesn't seem bothered by the experience; in fact, he seems excited by it.

"Thank you for showing me, Shinsou!"

"Uh… you're welcome?"

"Do you think maybe sometime you could do it again? I'd like to experiment with trying to snap myself out of it."

Hitoshi looks into those guileless green eyes and feels warm. "Sure."

A loud *thunk* startles him. Bakugou has slammed his hand down on the nearest table. "Alright, c'mon, nerd. It's getting fuckin' late and you gotta show him your quirk."

They go outside.

Of all the things Hitoshi has expected, he does *not* expect Izuku to light up like a Christmas tree. Nor does he expect him to pick up the dumpster and heft it overhead as easily as he might a saltine box. Though he could've predicted what happened next.

"Aw, c'mon, seriously Deku?"

Izuku sets the dumpster back down, green sparks fading. "Sorry,

Kacchan. I didn't mean to tilt it."

They all pitch in to throw the garbage back into the bin. Bakugou grumbles. One vigorous hand wash later, Iida bids them all goodnight, and the rest follow.

Just like that his quirk is forgotten.

Christmas.

One of his favorite, and least favorite seasons. The holiday is nice, but beating his head into the wall trying to find meaningful gifts for his parents is not. This year, he'd gotten lucky; both of them had let a few gift ideas slip over the course of the year, so Hitoshi's presents are already tucked neatly into bags. He therefore rewards himself with an evening of watching Denki panic.

"Ah shit, what was the name of that band Jirou mentioned," he mutters, bent intently over his phone. His blonde hair is frizzy. He's making it worse, wringing his fingers in his bangs. "Something with an 'l'? Luh… Lonely something? Lonely Boys? Lovely Boys? Dammit I shoulda written it down!"

Hitoshi pops another chip into his mouth. "You *should* have started looking about a month ago."

"Be quiet, you."

Hitoshi's gifts already sit wrapped in his closet. A new PS4 game for Denki, a few exotic spices and a kitchen utensil for his mom, a new hat and an array of old-timey candies for his dad, gift cards for whoever he gets for the family gift exchange.

He'd thought long and hard about getting something for Bakugou. Would that be weird? To get a gift for someone who isn't even a friend?

Maybe he just wants to see the expression on Bakugou's face when Hitoshi hands him a gift, and he has nothing to give in return.

But, it would be *very* odd to give Bakugou something, and no one else. The others are his friends. Bakugou is just a cute asshole. A cute

asshole who makes a mean bowl of soup, and who may or may not be ogling his butt when he's not looking.

Ah, fuck.

The day before Christmas Eve they close early. Hitoshi hands out gift cards as he says his goodbyes to everyone, and does not let his eyes linger on Bakugou.

Izuku's "Merry Christmas, Shinsou!" follows him out the door. He's just swinging his leg over his bicycle when a gruff voice calls to him.

"Oi! Eyebags!"

Bakugou has followed him. He holds out his downturned hand and Hitoshi reaches out automatically to receive, only to fumble the wad of bills that's slapped into his palm.

"Whoa, okay, what?" He clutches at them before they can go fluttering all over the street. God, he isn't going to count the money out in front of Bakugou but there *has* to be a couple hundred here. *What the hell?* "Uh… what is this, exactly?"

"It's your pay."

"My… pay?"

"Yeah, your pay. Did I fucking stutter?"

It doesn't compute. Iida had said they don't make enough to pay him.

"Uh... I'm a volunteer. You don't pay volunteers."

He tries to shove the money back toward Bakugou, who crosses his arms like a petulant child to refuse it. Dick. Hitoshi shoves the fist full of bills down the front of Bakugou's shirt instead--

—and almost topples right off his bike when Bakugou snatches his wrist and growls angrily. Actually *growls.* He didn't know such a sound was possible from a human, but there it is. He also didn't know it was possible to Vulcan death-pinch someone's tendons into immobility, *ow.*

He's forced to withdraw, money in hand.

"I don't want your damn charity." Bakugou is scowling, still holding his wrist. "It's your fucking money. You've earned it."

The hand falls away.

Hitoshi knows he's lost. Bakugou would sooner burn the money than have it returned. He's so damn proud. Hitoshi wonders what in Bakugou's history built such an iron wall.

He withdraws his wallet and folds the money carefully inside, nice and slow, then tucks it into his back pocket. He smiles.

"Alright, alright. Thanks." His grin stretches wider. "It's real sweet of you to notice all my hard work. Been watching me?"

The scowl deepens. It's too dark to see if Bakugou has turned red, which is a shame. Hitoshi bets that dusky flush would look lovely in the sunset.

"Do you get off on being a total fucking weirdo?"

Hitoshi really should shut up. He isn't helping his prospects at all by needling Bakugou. But he can't help it. He can't see that frown without itching to dig the furrow between Bakugou's brows a little deeper.

"Maybe. You like thinking about me getting off?"

Aaaand he's gone. Bakugou stomps back inside muttering curses, and flips him the bird when Hitoshi calls a 'Merry Christmas' to his retreating back.

Damn. He really *is* an asshole, isn't he?

He'd probably feel bad about it if he hadn't caught Bakugou staring at him just this morning. The sides of the stainless steel pots make pretty decent mirrors.

Hitoshi grins the whole way home.

Winter break is usually one of his favorite times. No school, no cooking, just chilling at his parent's house for a few days gorging himself on home cooking and the warmth of familial love.

This year, he's restless. His thoughts are drawn again and again back to the diner, his new friends… and Bakugou.

Mostly Bakugou.

Wondering what he's doing for Christmas. What he's getting for Christmas. Whether he's thinking of Hitoshi and wondering too. Stupid puppy crush stuff. He's never had it bad for someone who's seemed so utterly disinterested in him. Ugh.

The fact that the thought of going back to work is more exciting to him than going to his extended family's Christmas genuinely makes him feel like an asshole. But it's not enough to stop him from telling his mother he's needed back at work.

Work. He's been paid once now, so maybe it really *is* a job.

His parents, seemingly pleased by his work ethic (*god* he is such an asshole) load him up with leftovers and send him on his merry way.

He's back two days after Christmas promptly at seven. The door is already unlocked. He pushes his way inside to a downpour of alt-rock, and smiles at the sight of a familiar spiky head.

"Didja miss me?"

He's met with an upraised middle finger. Evidently Bakugou hasn't forgotten his last remarks.

His chest is warm. It's wonderful to be back.

The days leading up to the New Years' party Izuku is almost bouncing off the walls. He chatters away nonstop, to Hitoshi's amusement and Bakugou's annoyance.

"If I hafta hear one more thing about the damn punch, I'm gonna spit in it!"

Izuku stops. Then his eyes widen. "So you *are* coming! I'm so glad, Kacchan!"

Confirming Bakugou's attendance is definitely worth the tirade of cursing, in Hitoshi's opinion.

The day of, the diner is only open for the afternoon. Ostensibly

because the crowds will be thin in the evenings, and to give Izuku time for last-minute preparations. It's mildly inconvenient. Hitoshi had been planning to use 'working late' as one excuse to avoid going home; Denki will be going out to Jirou's for his New Years' party, but if he catches sight of Hitoshi before he leaves, there will undoubtedly be questions.

Izuku's party starts at nine. They're finished closing up by four. That gives him five whole hours to kill.

One hour is spent at the store. Izuku has already regaled him with the full spread of food expected tonight, which sounds like more than enough, but he wants to bring something. First a housewarming gift, then something for the party proper.

Partway through shopping, he gets to thinking about what Bakugou might bring, which leads him to thinking about Bakugou in general, which leads him to the realization that, shit, this will be the first time they've hung out — or, been around each other, they're not really *hanging out* — since they've met. It's an opportunity to clean himself up a little.

Which leads to an excursion to the local mall.

Okay, maybe it'll be easier to eat up the time than he thought.

Two hours later, his hair is trimmed and his outfit is picked. He arrives home to an empty apartment and a text on his phone telling him Denki is already at Jirou's, and he's welcome to swing by once he's done working.

"I'm a jerk, aren't I?" he says, swiping Denki's message away. Bagheera rubs against his leg.

One day. One day he'll finally introduce Kaminari to his new friends. For now: it's time to get ready.

"Shinsou, you made it!"

Izuku, beaming, is the one that answers Hitoshi's knock. He's swept inside the apartment into a blast of sound and warmth.

Even though he's only fifteen minutes late — fashionable, and to avoid the potential awkwardness that comes with being the first — the party seems to already be in full swing. Music and the chatter of unfamiliar voices wash over him. Hitoshi slips his shoes off and offers up the bags of chips and chocolate-dipped pretzels that are his contribution.

Izuku is already digging through the bags when Uraraka peeks around the corner.

"Oh, Shinsou, this is Uraraka Ochaco!" Izuku says, putting an arm around her. "Uraraka, this is Shinsou Hitoshi. He's the one who stepped in to help when I was out with my broken hand!"

Hitoshi nods. "We met once."

Uraraka beams. "Ah, I remember! Thank you so much for all your help!'

Embarrassed, Hitoshi can only say "no problem". It wasn't for Izuku's sake that he'd stepped in — not that he'd ever tell any of them that.

Izuku seems not to notice his discomfort. As soon as Hitoshi's shoes are off, he's being pulled into a packed living room.

Wow. There are more people than he was expecting. The faces he recognizes immediately are Kirishima and Iida, who come to greet him with two girls in tow.

"Shinsou! It's good to see you!" Iida, dressed in slacks and a button-down of all things, chops his hand in a wave. "I believe you have yet to meet my girlfriend. Mei, this is Shinsou Hitoshi. He is a psychology student at the local university!"

He greets one girl, then the other. They seem nice. Both different kinds of exuberant, and both different kinds of heroes, he’s surprised to learn.

"I'm Ashido Mina! But I'm also known as Pinky, the acid Hero!" Kirishima's very pink girlfriend chirps. "I can secrete acid from my skin!"

Bubblegum pink and bubblegum personality. Yes, he can *definitely* see why those two are together.

Hatsume's strange yellow eyes gleam as she approaches him. "I am Hatsume Mei, support hero and inventor! Say, what's your quirk? Do

you need any support items? I can make anything you imagine!"

"Mei, he's not a hero," Iida says sternly.

"So? It's not only heroes that can benefit from the use of my babies!"

This begins what sounds like a well-worn argument between them. Izuku, seemingly used to it, just pulls Hitoshi away to continue his introductions.

Sato Rikido, the legendary baker, is a tall, muscular man with a broad smile. He too is a hero.

Asui Tsuyu, a girl with disconcertingly round, bulging eyes, is one as well. Her smile is eerily wide, but her croaked "Nice to meet you, Shinsou" seems friendly enough.

There are two faces he does recognize. Not that he knows them, but he's seen them in the news. Hitoshi hadn't realized that when Izuku said 'Shouto' that he meant *Shouto,* the fire and ice hero*,* son of the top hero Endeavor. And his boyfriend —

"Hello!" Gale Force booms, clapping Hitoshi on the back so hard he coughs. "So nice to meet you!"

The Hurricane Hero dwarfs everyone else in the room, including Iida, and exudes an aura of exuberance surpassing even Denki at his most caffeinated. Hitoshi wonders if the fact that his breath smells like straight alcohol has anything to do with it.

"This is Yoarashi Inasa," Shouto says. He sounds almost bored.

"Would you care for a drink?" Inasa points toward the kitchen. "There is sake, and beer, and I brought some very excellent cinnamon whiskey! It will perk you right up!"

Well. That explains his breath. And potentially his volume, if the staying hand Shouto lays on Inasa's shoulder means anything.

Hitoshi looks around. There really aren't as many people here as he'd first thought; it's just the vibrant atmosphere of so many assertive personalities that fills the room. He had no idea Izuku knew so many heroes.

Another slow pass over the crowd does not reveal any sign of spiky blonde hair. Bakugou is not here.

Disappointed, Hitoshi heads to the kitchen. Maybe he will take Inasa up on a drink — not the cinnamon whisky though, that's a one-way ticket straight to the toilet—

And there he is. Standing at the oven, stirring something in a steaming pan:

Bakugou.

He does not look around as Hitoshi enters. Probably presuming it's just another guest grabbing a drink, which technically he is. Hitoshi rummages through one of the coolers on the floor, taking the opportunity to stare shamelessly. There's not much to see, given that Bakugou is wearing sweats and a black t-shirt, but it's the thought that counts.

There's soju mixed amongst the beers. Unexpected, but welcome. A green bottle of peach-flavored courage calls to his sweet tooth; he twists off the cap then chugs a few bracing mouthfuls before approaching Bakugou.

"Can't even go a few hours without cooking, huh?"

Bakugou doesn't even flinch. Nor does he turn around. "You're fuckin' late."

Oh, he's been anticipated. That's no fun.

Hitoshi comes alongside him. Bakugou drags a wooden spoon through something thick and creamy-looking. It smells like cinnamon and vanilla. "It's fashionable to be late, you know. What are you making?"

"None of your fuckin' business."

"Does that mean I can't have some?"

"It ain't even done!"

Hitoshi bends closer, inhaling deeply. "Smells good." He’s close enough to catch some of the fragrant steam on his face. Close enough that when he draws back, he can catch the scent of Bakugou, too, clean and fresh.

“Stop hovering, you’re gonna drop a hair in it!” Bakugou’s shoulder nudges him. Hitoshi pulls his head back, but doesn’t move.

“I’ll go away if you give me a taste of it.”

Truly, he doesn't know or care what Bakugou is making. All he cares about is the warmth of Bakugou's arm against his sternum.

"Oh my god, just get a damn spoon already!"

He's quite sure that Bakugou's scowl isn't as severe as normal. Nor has his arm moved. Hitoshi grins. "Don't know where they are. I'd feel rude digging through Izuku's kitchen."

With a muffled curse, Bakugou leans over and opens the drawer to Hitoshi's right. He produces a spoon and dips it into the mixture, then lifts it. Hitoshi, idiot that he is, leans right in and closes his mouth around it, nearly choking when he realizes both what he's done and how uncomfortably warm the stuff is on his tongue. Sweat prickles on his forehead.

Bakugou doesn't seem to notice. "There, you got a taste. Are you fuckin' happy?" He pulls the spoon out of Hitoshi's mouth and tosses it in the sink with a loud clatter.

His taste buds have finally processed the flavor through the heat. It's eggnog. Hitoshi doesn't normally enjoy it, but, like everything Bakugou makes, it's *good.* He chases a dribbled drop at the corner of his mouth, and he'll be damned if Bakugou doesn't glance his way.

He can't stop the stupid, lascivious grin. "Yeah. Real thick and creamy, just how I like it."

"You are *so* fucking creepy," Bakugou says. His ears are red.

"I think you secretly enjoy it."

Bakugou twists the oven knob so hard it pops off. Whoops. Time to make his exit.

"Well, I'm gonna go creep on some other people," he says, making sure to bump Bakugou on the way out. "Have fun cooking."

After that, the party is a little more enjoyable.

Hitoshi helps himself to food and more drink. The rest of the soju and then a cup of mulled wine smudge the lingering stranger anxiety until he's warm and pleasantly fuzzy around the edges. He strikes up a few conversations. Bakugou stomps out of the kitchen twenty minutes later to tell Izuku that "his fucking eggnog is chilling on the stove, don't forget to put it in the damn fridge" and then he disappears

again.

“Man, being in the kitchen sure makes him bossy, huh?” Hitoshi remarks to Ashido and Kirishima, taking another swig of wine.

“Oh, he’s always been that way,” Ashido chirps. “Actually, I think he’s kinda mellowed out.”

“Really?”

“Totally! You shoulda seen him when he was in school. He was like, a total freaking edgelord.”

“Mina!” Kirishima squawks.

“What? It’s true.”

“You two went to the same school?” Hitoshi asks, trying not to sound overly interested.

“Uh-huh. Not grade school, but we were both in the same class at UA.”

UA

Bakugou went to UA?

About a thousand questions have just flooded into his mind, too much for him to even process. Bakugou was at UA. And if Ashido is a hero, it’s logical to guess they both went through the hero course, but… he’s not a hero.

Why?

“You both went to UA?"

“Yeah.” Ashido cocks her head. “What, you didn’t know?”

Kirishima steps in. “Uh… we haven’t exactly talked about that, much…” He lowers his voice. “You know. Because of the whole—” and then makes a series of strange hand motions. Hitoshi has no idea what that means, but Ashido nods.

“Ohhhh, okay. He’s still touchy about that, huh?”

What? *What?*

“What are you nerds talking about?”

Hitoshi’s heart tries its best to crawl into his throat. Bakugou pushes his way in between him and Kirishima, clutching a red plastic cup.

"Just you," Ashido says nonchalantly.

For a second he swears his heart actually stops. Then he catches Ashido's wide, mischievous gaze, and comprehension dawns.

"Yeah. We were all wondering if you were going to hide in the kitchen all evening," he adds.

"I wasn't fucking *hiding*, damn Deku didn't get the stupid eggnog finished before everyone got here! He kept leaving and the cream was gonna fucking burn, so I—"

Whatever the forbidden topic, apparently Bakugou hasn't actually overheard, thank fuck.

"Whoa, easy there." Hitoshi nudges him, almost lightheaded with relief. "Just teasing."

Bakugou must have been at the alcohol, because there's no other reason his breath should smell so strongly of cinnamon. Holy shit. There's someone here who will actually drink that stuff other than Inasa?

"Piss off, Eyebags."

"Hey, *you* are the one who inserted yourself in *our* conversation!"

They bicker. Hitoshi becomes aware of Ashido's stare, and her knowing glance at Kirishima. His palms are suddenly sweaty. He downs the rest of his drink and excuses himself to get another.

The party rolls on. Time is beginning to feel runny, slipping through his fingers. One minute he's chatting with Izuku, the next they're all playing some kind of card game, and in a blink he's kneeling next to Shouto, helping him clean up a platter of downed hors d'oeuvres with Inasa apologizing over them.

But the time eleven-thirty rolls around he's clutching a glass of water, trying to knock down some of the giddy, spinning feeling in his head. Definitely done for the night. He's gotta be sober enough to get home.

The TV is turned on. People have amassed at Shibuya Crossing for the

countdown. The whole crowd glows, rippling like a school of fish in the red from the surrounding lights.

"Oh that looks like so much fun!" Ashido groans, plastered to the TV.

That's funny. 'Fun' was the exact opposite of what he was thinking.

"A bit too crowded for me, *kero*," Asui croaks.

"So many people gathered in one place!" Inasa booms. "Just look at them! I can feel the excitement! The *passion!* It must be incredible!"

A breeze lifts Hitoshi's hair. Who opened a window?

"I don't know, I think it would be pretty strange to be there at midnight." Shouto wraps his arms around Inasa's waist. The wind dies. "Especially when everyone starts kissing."

"Aw, you don't think it would be kinda sweet?" Ashido unglues herself from the TV. "Like a public declaration of love, and hope for the new year!"

"Of course *you* would be into slobbering all over someone in public, Raccoon Eyes."

Ashido, undeterred, bounces to her feet. "Yes! Yes, I would!" She's across the room and hanging off Kirishima in a blink, planting a wet, messy kiss on him.

"Ugh, get a damn room!"

She delicately lifts her middle finger at Bakugou, too busy to pay him any mind.

"Sounds like you're kinda jealous," Hitoshi says. He's been quite content to watch everyone's antics and sip away the drunkenness, but this is too good to resist.

Bakugou's lip curls.

"You think I want someone droolin' all over me?" he says, swaying closer. Oh, he is *definitely* hammered.

"Maybe."

"Fat fuckin' chance."

"Spoken like a guy who's never had a decent kiss."

Bakugou follows him into the kitchen, jabbing him with a finger when he goes to refill his water glass. "Whadda *you* know about it? Ain't you a kissless virgin?"

Oof, right for the jugular. If he were the sort of person who cared about that, he'd be insulted. Besides, Bakugou is only half-right. "Whoever said that?"

"S'all over your fuckin' face."

"I'll have you know that *plenty* of guys find me perfectly kissable." Bakugou's eyes follow his thumb as Hitoshi drags it beneath his own lower lip. "Why? Jealous?"

"The hell would I have to be jealous about?"

Evidently the alcohol has killed his few functioning brain cells, because Hitoshi opens his stupid mouth and says: "The fact that other guys have kissed me and you haven't."

Bakugou barks a laugh. "You're delusional."

He's so close. Cornering Hitoshi at the sink. But when Hitoshi leans forward Bakugou backs up, keeping a steady distance between them. It feels like they're playing 3-D chess, and he's ass at chess, especially while drunk, but where sense has failed, the liquid courage remains. He presses forward.

"Mmm, I don't think so." He wets his lips. Bakugou isn't even subtle about watching. "You won't know until you try. Howabout it?"

The look in those ruby eyes is wicked. Bakugou leans close enough for Hitoshi to feel breath on his lips and hisses:

"Why don't you fuckin' *make* me?"

All the air in the room evaporates. Bakugou is grinning at him, a sharp grin heavy with implication, but the game is over. The smirk slides off Hitoshi's face as if slapped off.

He scoots down the counter and out of Bakugou's caging presence, deaf to everything but the overwhelming need to *get away*. Blindly he heads through the nearest doorway, stumbling when the tile becomes carpet, and realizes he's gone the wrong fucking direction. This leads

deeper into the house. He doesn't care. Turning back will take him past Bakugou, and he can't do that right now.

Down the hall. Past the occupied bathroom. There's a closed door at the end of the hall, but another door to his left is ajar. Hitoshi pushes his way into what looks like an office and closes the door, but it's still not right. The air is back, but it's suffocating.

There's no window, but he's blessed with a sliding glass door that leads to a balcony. Hitoshi lets himself out. There he hunches over a cold iron rail, breathing deep drafts of icy air until his lungs burn. Gradually the fist around his heart loosens.

He coughs in the dry wind, but the burning remains. It's fire in his throat. He downs water until his cup is empty and the burn is quenched to faint, creeping warmth behind his eyes.

He isn't going to do it. He isn't. Not over some stupid, thoughtless, drunken remark—

The stars mist into blurry halos. Hitoshi scrubs the tears away before they can fall. Fuck. Being drunk always drags his emotions close to the surface, and he fucking hates it. This isn't even worth crying over. Not when he's heard shit just like it or worse over the years.

But fuck, it hurts.

Hitoshi stands in the dark, relishing the nip of the wind as cold settles into his ears and hands. It helps. A little physical ache to distract him from the thought that he believed Bakugou to be different. Up there on the roof, Hitoshi had thought he'd understood.

Stupid. How *could* Bakugou know? Hitoshi had never disclosed the depth to which those comments bother him, and he knows Bakugou likes to play rough. This is all his own fault.

The pain fades into numbness. Hitoshi remains at his perch, no longer able to feel his hands and feet, steeped too deeply in his own inertia to even bother going inside.

A boom. Light explodes on the horizon, followed by an eruption of pops and cracks. The night blooms to life in showers of multicolored sparks as far as the eye can see as the world rings in the New Year.

He can hear faint whoops from inside. Cheers from neighboring houses and apartments. By now couples must be entwining in warm

embraces. Laughing. Swearing silent resolutions, brimming with hope and anticipation.

Hitoshi shivers, tucking his hands into his hoodie. He's not ready to face anyone. Not yet.

The fireworks begin to peter out over the next ten minutes, dwindling to the occasional thump and burst of bright, cold light. They're beautiful. Like comets dying in the atmosphere.

The door behind him slides open. He doesn't look around as it rattles shut, but he's forced to when someone presses something against his arm. He looks down to see a steaming mug.

"Here," Bakugou mumbles.

Hitoshi takes it. The mug is searing against his frozen flesh.

He could just dump it out. Splatter some poor, unsuspecting plant or person below with eggnog, but he won't. He isn't upset anymore.

The first sip sits in his gut like an ember. The second he rolls around in his mouth, warming it, then breathes out a cloud of rich vanilla fog.

Bakugou shifts. Clad in only his sweats and t-shirt, he's probably freezing. Hitoshi would feel bad for him, but the cold has numbed him all the way through.

By the time he's finished his eggnog it's gone cool. He is, however, much warmer.

"Thanks," he says. He isn't really sure what else to say. What else to *do*. It's dark, and freezing, and long past time for him to be going home. He turns to the door.

"I know you wouldn't do that."

He looks back. "Huh?"

"I know you wouldn't do that," Bakugou says again.

Ah.

Hitoshi leans back on the rail, looking out at the star-studded sky. "Don't worry about it, alright?"

He really just wants Bakugou to drop it. Forget about the whole thing instead of ripping the scab off.

Bakugou shakes his head. "No, don't try to fuckin' deflect."

Hitoshi shrugs one shoulder. Okay. Fine, they'll do this.

"I'm tryin' to tell you that I know you're not the kind of guy that would do something like that."

"Am I not?" He flexes his fingers around the mug. What would Bakugou know? He doesn't know Hitoshi. Tonight has proved that. "After a while I begin to wonder."

"No, you're fuckin' not."

"If you say so."

"You're *not*."

Hitoshi huffs quietly. "I suppose."

"Fuckin'—"

His collar is seized and jerked down. Hitoshi yelps and almost drops the mug as he's yanked off-balance, right against Bakugou's unyielding chest. Warm, dry lips cover his.

The kiss is over before he can really comprehend it. Bakugou withdraws, shoulders hunched and arms wrapped around himself like a shield.

"You're not," he says. His face burns pink and red in the light of a stray firework.

Hitoshi is too stunned to even argue.

"Okay."

Another firework sparks and dies.

It really is a beautiful night.

January

Fuck *everything.*

Hitoshi's alarm goes off and he briefly considers hurling his phone into the trash. That would require effort, though. He drags himself out of bed.

The diner is open today, New Year's Day. Why, he doesn't fucking understand, but he doesn't make the rules. All he knows is that he'd happily kill for three more hours of sleep. He'd crawled into bed around one-forty-five, but it had taken forever to finally drift off.

Dry lips.

Warmth.

It's a private cinema behind his eyelids. His brain had replayed the kiss until it had begun to lose all clarity, becoming nothing but a vague tingling memory of pressure and heat. It had been so fast. More of a peck than a kiss, really.

Hitoshi scrubs his teeth with the toothbrush, replacing the taste of death with wintergreen mint. Splashes water on his face and calls it good. He'd sacrificed breakfast for an extra thirty minutes' sleep, which made exactly no dent in his exhaustion. The freezing bicycle ride to the diner does a better job of invigorating him than his bed had.

He's so tired that he can't even muster up a thrill when he sees Bakugou. He's not the only one looking half-dead, though. Izuku and Bakugou are quiet and sluggish, both of them baggy-eyed enough to rival him. It had been quite the party.

That day sheer exhaustion spares him any awkwardness. Not so the next day. Once he's properly rested, the world comes back into glaring focus.

Bakugou had kissed him.

Bakugou had *kissed* him. You think he'd be over the fucking moon about it, but of course he can't enjoy it. His first impulse is to rationalize; sure he'd been kissed, but there's any number of reasons for that:

A dare.

Penance, to soothe whatever passes as Bakugou's conscience.

Out of — and this one *really* fucking grates — *pity*.

But penance fits the best.

Oh, yeah. It makes total sense. Even drunk, Bakugou must have had enough self-awareness to realize he'd upset Hitoshi. And Hitoshi had been broadcasting his interest so blatantly that Bakugou would have to be brain dead to miss it. Yeah, that's gotta be it.

He looks at you.

Fuck. No matter how deep he buries it, that stupid kernel of hope continues to bud. And it's very, *very* annoying.

His faint, ever-present awareness of Bakugou seems to have exploded. Bakugou is *everywhere.* Every noise. Every motion. The smell of him. Everything communicated straight to Hitoshi's brain in brilliant technicolor. And the weird part is… it feels like he can sense the very same thing happening to Bakugou. They're transmitting to each other on an invisible wavelength or trading pheromones or *something,* and he doesn't know what to do about it. So, he does what he always does when he doesn't know what to do:

Nothing.

Waiting is something he's good at. If Bakugou really is interested in him, he'll make a move sooner or later.

It's been a week, and nothing has happened.

If they had returned to the status quo, Hitoshi would have been disappointed, but understood. But they haven't.

The slow-growing, antagonistic camaraderie between them has died. Izuku is chatty as ever, and Hitoshi can play pretend-everything-is-normal with him just fine; the two of them making the kind of remarks that usually earn a sharp rebuke or smartass comment, but Bakugou is silent. He doesn't even snap at Hitoshi when Hitoshi accidentally adds the wrong seasoning to the soup once. If it weren't for the fact that he still catches Bakugou looking at him, Hitoshi

would think there was a complete lack of interest at all.

The next Friday evening, Izuku, laden with garbage bags, cocks his head toward the door in a silent request for help.

“Did something happen between you and Kacchan at the New Years Party?” he asks as soon as they’re around back.

Hitoshi flips the dumpster lid open for him. He’s uncertain how much he wants to divulge. It’s a private matter. But Izuku is Bakugou’s oldest friend, and surely he has insights that Hitoshi doesn’t...

He tells Izuku.

“Oh, Kacchan,” Izuku sighs. “That was really thoughtless of him.”

“Yeah, well, he was drunk.”

“Still, though…”

The dumpster lid slams shut. Izuku dusts his hands off and shoves them in his pockets.

“I’m guessing the eggnog and kiss were his way of apologizing,” Hitoshi says.

Izuku nods. “Yes, but it wasn’t just an apology. I’m sure he wanted to kiss you that night, he just didn’t know how to do it. He doesn’t normally get drunk.”

“Oh. Well, lucky me I guess… and now he’s acting all weird because—what. He feels bad?”

Izuku’s eyes are distant. “I think… he’s waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“Waiting for you.” Izuku nods to himself, nibbling his lower lip. “Yes. I’m sure that’s what it is.”

Exasperation blooms in his stomach. “Waiting for me to do what? I wasn’t exactly subtle at the party.”

“Well, you were drunk too, weren’t you?”

Well, he was. But he was sober enough by the time Bakugou kissed him.

“A little.”

“Well, that’s just it then. He isn’t really sure how you feel. He said something mean and then kissed you, and even though you didn’t run away that doesn’t mean you’re interested. He probably feels like he shouldn’t push it, not after he hurt your feelings.”

Hitoshi groans. “Seriously?”

Oh, god. This is some high school level shit. Some high school level shit he’s definitely contributing to because he’s just as guilty of dancing around his feelings as Bakugou apparently is.

“You’re saying I should probably just go for it then, huh?”

And holy hell, *how* can Izuku pull off that sparkly, kawaii-eyed bullshit?

“Yes! You definitely should.”

Hoooo boy. Okay. Okay, okay. God, it’s been so fucking long since he’s planned a date… best to go with something safe. Something easy.

“Okay. What kind of movies does he like?”

They return inside chilled and windswept five minutes later, but Bakugou doesn’t remark on their absence. He continues stacking containers into bags. Iida is balancing the register for tomorrow. Kirishima is drying the clean trays, and so Hitoshi grabs a broom to begin what has become his task: sweeping and mopping the diner.

He drags his feet. Listening as first Iida, then Kirishima, then finally Izuku say goodnight. By the time he’s dumping the dirty mop water, all but the kitchen lights are off and he and Bakugou are alone.

Hitoshi pulls on his jacket slowly, aware that Bakugou is bundled up and waiting at the door. His hands are so sweaty that it’s difficult to put on his gloves.

Okay. All he has to do is say it.

But as Bakugou holds the door open from him, he finds the words stick in his throat. He walks through the opening and down the street in halting baby steps, for all the world like he’s just going to fucking go home. Go home, wake up, and perpetuate this stupid dance another day.

Bakugou's keys rattle behind him.

Hitoshi turns on his heel.

"You wanna watch a movie with me tomorrow night?" he asks, sounding annoyingly breathless.

Bakugou, jiggling his keys out of the cold lock, cocks his head. "What?"

Oh, fuck.

"A movie. With me. Tomorrow night. My place."

Goddammit, that isn't even an invitation, it's a fucking McDonald's order. What the fuck.

Bakugou surveys him expressionlessly. "Sure."

Relief crashes through him, sweet and bright. "Cool. Can I get your number so I can text you my address?"

He's so relieved that he immediately fumbles his phone trying to get it out of his pocket. *Smooth.* Even smoother when, after he picks it off the ground, he has to strip one glove off with his teeth because the stupid fuzzy lining has glued itself to his sweaty palms. But the result is worth it. He has Bakugou's number. And thirty seconds later, Bakugou has his.

"Alright, see you tomorrow," Hitoshi says.

"No shit, you're working aren't you?"

And that's the first smartass quip he's gotten all week. Hitoshi grins. "Of course. You'd miss me too much if I didn't."

And, damn. If it doesn't feel *good* to be flipped off.

Denki raises an eyebrow at him as Hitoshi bumps his legs with the vacuum. His lips move. Hitoshi flicks the power switch. "What?"

"I said, what's this all about? You got a hot date or something?"

"Something like that."

Denki brightens. "Really?"

"Maybe."

Denki pouts when he powers the vacuum back on, stifling any further conversation. Hitoshi knows that look. His friend isn't going to stop peppering him with questions all night, but right now he needs to make *something* of the disaster their apartment has become. Just look: when he wedges the vacuum into the crevices surrounding Denki's chair, it crackles like a live wire, unearthing a million crumbs from their nests.

Empty cans in the trash. Dishes washed. Denki finally gets off his ass and starts helping him wipe down surfaces when he realizes Hitoshi isn't going to be deterred from cleaning. Bagheera had fled at the sound of the vacuum but creeps back out as Hitoshi begins to sweep the stray litter from around his box. Oh, shit. Is Bakugou allergic to cats?

He asks.

No, comes the answer. Followed by: *U have a cat?*

Yeah.

U would

He doesn't really have anything to say to that. So, he doesn't.

Denki finally corners him when he's wiping down the kitchen counters.

"Soooooo," he drawls, throwing an arm across Hitoshi's shoulders. "Who is he?"

"Just some guy I met at work."

Denki pulls a face. "Just 'some guy?'"

"Uh-huh."

"C'monnnn don't be like that. Just tell me!"

Hitoshi jabs him with the wet sponge. "There's nothing to tell, Denks. It isn't anything serious. We haven't even gone on a date yet."

Denki's squint is positively devilish. "Bullshit. In three and a half years you haven't ever brought anyone home. This is *big*."

Sometimes Hitoshi swears Denki has a second brain just for gossip. He sighs. "I'm just trying to take it slow. Watch a movie. Hang out. See if we're even compatible."

Denki just stares at him.

Stares.

Keeps staring.

When Hitoshi refuses to crack, he turns up his nose. "Alright, alright, keep your secrets. See if I care."

Hitoshi is not fooled. "I'll do that."

"You're a real killjoy, you know that?"

"Yep."

Denki's arm slides off. He's finally going to let it go, it seems. "Okay, fine. I won't bug you about him, but if you two get serious you better introduce me!"

"Of course."

Hitoshi makes sure to look him in the eye when he answers. He means it. As his oldest friend, there's no one he would rather Bakugou meet first. Of course that means he'll finally have to explain how he wound up dating the asshole that kicked them out of the diner, but… he'll handle it.

Denki snags a cream biscuit out of the cupboard and wanders off, defeated. Just when Hitoshi thinks he's finally going to be left alone, bright blonde hair pokes back around the corner.

"You know I got D&D tomorrow, but do you need me to sleep over at Jirou's after? In case you wanna…"

His overzealous eyebrow wiggling leaves something to be desired.

"...No."

As exciting as the prospect seems, it would be better to have a built-in excuse to end the night should things go poorly.

But first, he has to make sure Bakugou doesn't set one foot into the apartment and then run away screaming.

He lathers up the sponge again and gets to work.

The next day, the freeze that had settled in the diner thaws. Bakugou is still not as animated as usual, but he snaps twice at Izuku's humming and is back to calling Hitoshi 'Eyebags' — the litmus test that indicates things are returning to normal.

As the clock ticks closer to seven, an army of squirrels takes up residence in Hitoshi's stomach.

He finishes his closing tasks early and flicks a casual, two-fingered wave. As soon as he's out the door: he bolts. The bicycle ride home takes ten minutes instead of the usual fifteen, and his throat is raw from panting. All he needs is enough time for a few last-minute preparations. A fresh roll of toilet paper. Lighting a candle in the landing — oh, shit, will that make it seem like he's trying to set the mood? Maybe no candle then — and another quick scoop of Bagheera's litter. He's ready.

...He's not ready. He's fucking sweaty and his clothes smell like onions.

A change of clothes and swipe of deodorant under each armpit refresh him. He washes his face. Eyes the bottle of cologne that's been sitting unused in the medicine cabinet the last two years. Would that be super obvious? Maybe if it's just a dab...

A knock at the door.

The adrenaline dump is very unwelcome.

A few deep, slow breaths to wrangle his nerves. *It's just a movie.* No expectations of anything happening tonight except relaxing with a friend.

He opens the door.

"Hey."

Bakugou is there, a black-bundled specter with gimlet red eyes. Hitoshi stands aside. The breeze that follows Bakugou inside smells like winter.

"Any trouble getting here?"

"Nah. But people in your apartment are fuckin' slobs," Bakugou says, squatting to unlace his shoes.

Hitoshi knows what he means. Shoes and umbrellas clutter the halls, overflow from the tiny crappy genkans. "Yeah, sorry. They didn't give us a whole lot of space here for stuff."

Hitoshi takes Bakugou's coat and hangs it, the perfect gentleman. He offers his least-creepy smile and tips his head toward the living room. "You want anything to drink?"

Two waters hit the coasters on the coffee table. By the time Hitoshi has them out, Bagheera has emerged from his bedroom to sniff at the tail of Bakugou's coat, and Bakugou is peering over the back of the couch to watch.

"This is Bagheera," Hitoshi says, patting Bagheera's rump. "Don't worry, he won't shred your coat."

"*Bagheera?*"

"Yep."

"Did you seriously name your cat after the fucking Jungle Book character?"

Bakugou has taken a seat at one end of the couch. Hitoshi throws himself down in the middle. "Sure did."

"You're a fucking nerd."

Hitoshi's smile widens. "Can't argue with that."

All the awkwardness between them is gone. It's the most natural thing in the world to shrug off Bakugou's insults, watch him sneer and bluff bravado. Hitoshi knows better. Like a recalcitrant cat, he's soft and playful underneath. What else could explain the gentle way Bakugou knuckles beneath Bagheera's chin when he comes begging for a scritch?

His heart thumps.

Hitoshi turns on the TV hastily. "So, what do you want to watch?"

"I thought you had something picked out?" Bakugou says, then sputters as Bagheera nails him right in the mouth with a waving tail.

"Oh, well, if I'm choosing then we're definitely watching Spaceballs."

"Oh my fucking god, just give that here!"

The remote is snatched out of his hands.

A movie is picked. Truthfully, Hitoshi isn't sure *what* Bakugou's chosen; he's too busy snickering at the sight of Bakugou trying to manage both the remote and the demanding cat in his lap. Bagheera has really taken a liking to him. This bodes well. Hitoshi has always heard that good people are well-liked by animals — maybe he'll discover how true that is.

It also *could* have something to do with the fact that they made clam chowder today.

The opening credits roll. Hitoshi offers Bakugou one more chance at a snack (refused) before turning off the room lights. In the flickering darkness, a chasm quietly opens.

He has forgotten that it's like this. The last movie date he'd been on had been in high school; a boring, silent affair that had culminated in nothing more than some clammy hand-holding. They had been at a theater then, the crowd mitigating some of the awkwardness. Here in his living room, he has no such luxury.

Perhaps he should have chosen gaming instead. Something that invites a back-and-forth instead of this: the quiet death of the earlier camaraderie.

The awareness is back.

Hitoshi's eyes are trained firmly in the TV, but his attention strains, pulled with gravitational force to the extreme edge of his perception. Bakugou's fingers are a liquid flicker. He's petting Bagheera, who has settled on his lap, damn it all. As happy as Hitoshi is that they're bonding, he hadn't considered that his cat might become a literal barrier to their physical closeness.

"Bathroom," he mutters ten minutes later, and vaults over the back of the sofa.

He doesn't feel guilty in the slightest when Bagheera comes running at the crinkle of the treat bag. Or when, after sprinkling some catnip on the floor, he shuts Bagheera into his bedroom. He'll be okay for a few hours.

A quick detour to the bathroom and then he's back. This time when he settles onto the couch he's centimeters closer. If he were to stretch out an arm, Bakugou would be within that casual span.

He's not quite brave enough for that.

The movie drones on. It is very involved; explosions, lots of dramatic music, a few too many lens flares. He hasn't absorbed any of it. It could be a space odyssey or a swashbuckling adventure, who the fuck knows. He lives for Bakugou's reflection in the adjacent window's dark glass. It's how he knows the instant Bakugou stops watching the movie and starts watching *him.*

They're just quick, darting glances at first, but then Bakugou uncrosses his legs and the motion somehow manages to shift him just that much closer to Hitoshi. Then the looks become a stare. How can he even pretend to ignore it? Hitoshi turns, and—

It's so much better than the first kiss. He'd been right. That had been a peck. But the warmth that covers his mouth this time is soft and saliva-damp and *sharp* as teeth nibble at his lower lip and a tongue follows, and *mmf*—

All the tension of the past weeks explodes. He pulls Bakugou onto his lap and grunts as Bakugou winds fingers into his hair and presses him into the soft couch cushions. His mouth is tingling. His *body* is tingling, zinging, *singing* with sensation as Bakugou sucks on his tongue and rocks against him.

Then abruptly, Bakugou tears his mouth away. His breath blasts across Hitoshi's lips, ragged and uneven.

"You good?"

Hitoshi actually laughs aloud. What the hell. Bakugou is interrupting the make out of the century to *see if he's okay.* And he'd worried this wouldn't work out. God, they're a pair of idiots.

"Never better. You?"

"Are you fuckin' kidding me?" Bakugou steals another kiss, hard and

open-mouthed. “Been waiting to do this for weeks.”

Hitoshi can’t help but gloat just a little. “See, I told you.”

“Huh?”

“*Plenty* of guys find me perfectly kissable. See?”

Bakugou’s growl rolls straight into his chest. “God you fuckin’ smarta—”

The rest of the word disappears into Hitoshi’s mouth.

As much as he'd enjoy kissing the night away, it's apparent that they're rapidly escalating to something much more involved when Bakugou drags his teeth down Hitoshi's neck and *bites.* A gentle bite, and the sucking that follows goes straight south, but he needs to pump the brakes.

Hitoshi pulls him back up for another kiss. Pets his fingers down Bakugou's nape until their breathing evens and their lips meet in lazy smacks.

"So, uh," he mumbles between kisses, "I know this is going to sound super lame, but… can we take it kinda slow?"

He doesn't want Bakugou to get the wrong idea about his request so he quickly adds: "It's not like I don't want to keep going, it's just… you were kinda right before."

"About what?" Bakugou rasps.

"About me being a virgin."

Funny, that it's so much easier to admit that than it is to admit his real feelings.

I really like you.

I want to get to know you.

I don't want this to be a one-off.

Bakugou huffs a laugh. "I fuckin' knew it."

Just for that, Hitoshi nips at his chin. "Bastard."

A long, slow sigh. Bakugou's eyes are black when he regards Hitoshi, the red swallowed by his pupils.

"Alright. Fine. I'll put on the fuckin' training wheels for you, Eyebags," he says. His voice is teasing, not unkind.

"Thank you, oh sex master. I'm in your debt."

"Sex *god.*"

He's ridiculous. Hitoshi wants so badly to know him.

"Well, sex master god, we have until ten before my roommate gets home. You want to keep watching or do something else?"

Bakugou just shoves him into the couch and kisses him again.

In the end, the movie finishes, cycles through the credits, and begins to autoplay the next one before either of them bother to find the remote. Hitoshi walks Bakugou out twenty minutes before ten and returns fifteen minutes later windswept, cold, and with the world's worst case of blue balls, but unable to stop smiling.

Denki comes home, takes one look at him, and offers him a stick of Jirou's concealer.

"You're gonna want that," he says, gesturing to Hitoshi's neck.

It's been a *wonderful* night.

The concealer stick is used.

Somehow, it seems like everyone knows anyway.

Kirishima punches him in the shoulder when Bakugou isn't looking. Iida pointedly adjusts his own collar. Izuku beams so brightly that Bakugou asks him "what the hell he's so fuckin' smiley about."

"Nothing," Izuku says. "Just had a really nice weekend."

"I don't wanna hear about you gettin' laid, nerd."

"*Kacchan!* That's not what I—"

The bickering begins anew, and just like that everything falls back into place.

A new routine begins to take shape. Prep, work, closing, then getting his face sucked off in the back of the empty diner. Hitoshi doesn't mind. In these moments Bakugou is pliant and hungry, more than willing to answer any question Hitoshi offers.

"What's your first name?"

He can feel Bakugou's grin against his lips.

"You mean you've gone this whole fuckin' time without knowing my name?"

"It's not like anyone told me."

He is not going to feel embarrassed for not asking sooner. Absolutely not. "But if you want I could always take a leaf out of Izuku's book, *Kacchan* — ow!"

That bite actually stung.

"Absolutely fuckin' *not.*"

"Then tell me."

His lip doesn't sting quite so much with a kiss to soothe it.

"...Katsuki."

Katsuki.

"Where did you learn to cook?"

Sharp teeth tug at his earlobe. "My old lady taught me some. Then when I was in high school they put us in private dorms the second year. Half the extras there only knew enough to boil water for their shitty cup noodles, but I'm fuckin' better than that."

His mouth is invaded. The handle of the fridge digs into his back, but he can't find it in himself to bother moving.

"Why soup?" he asks, then shivers as a tongue presses against an old hickey.

"Cuz it's fucking good."

Can't argue with that.

"How come I never see you use your quirk?"

There's just the briefest pause. Probably Bakugou trying to convince himself it's worth letting go of Hitoshi's lower lip to answer.

"You think I wanna blow up my fuckin' kitchen?"

"F— fair poi—" He's muffled by a demanding mouth.

"Where did you go to high school?"

The hands grabbing his ass freeze. He's finally hit the taboo topic. Hitoshi presses a kiss to Bakugou's lips in reassurance — *don't answer if you don't want to* — and Bakugou thaws.

"UA."

That will be a topic for another day. This time it's Hitoshi who shoves Bakugou against the fridge, and all is forgotten.

"Come over this weekend."

It's not even a question. "Okay."

And now he knows where Bakugou lives.

Denki almost explodes.

“You’re going to his place tomorrow?” His eyes are wide. Then, narrow and wicked as a positively evil smirk crosses his face. “Are you going to sleep over? Do you need any condoms? I think there’s a banana in the fridge if you need to practice—”

Hitoshi nails him in the gut with one of the couch cushions. Of course that doesn’t stop him. He’s literally crackling with energy; the returned cushion pops a blue spark against Hitoshi's hand.

"Oh, whoops. Sorry."

Denki sits. Hitoshi gets up.

"Aw, come on!"

Bakugou's apartment is further than Hitoshi had expected. Up a series of energy-zapping hills that make him think that, perhaps, *perhaps* he should reconsider his policy of biking everywhere. It may be a smallish town, but he's not normally out this far.

The apartment complex is nicer than his own. Not surprising, considering his housing is school-owned and built for convenience. He

feels a little guilty locking his bike to the nearest street sign.

The guilt is quickly forgotten. He's scarcely gotten his shoes off before Bakugou has him pinned to the wall.

"This movin' too fast?" Bakugou rasps when they emerge from a kiss minutes later.

"Um, not exactly?"

A full-body shudder as Bakugou's warm palm grinds against his crotch.

"What about this?"

"N— no…"

"Good."

He's tugged down the hall so swiftly he has only the barest impression of tidiness and dark colors before he's in Bakugou's bedroom. A lamp is on. The bed is big and soft and squeaks when Hitoshi's ass hits it, then squeaks again when Bakugou climbs on top of him.

He’s devoured. Pinned from chest to groin by warmth and implacable weight. Heat pulses in the crease of his thigh. Bakugou gives an approving groan when Hitoshi grinds up into it.

"Fuck—"

Bakugou strips off his shirt and flings it. Yanks Hitoshi's up past his nipples then, in an impatient fit, pulls both of their pants down to mid-thigh. He wants to look. Can't. Bakugou is on him again, fumbling in the nightstand, and then cool lotion is being smeared by a warm hand, firm fingers have him, *oh* —

Slick grip, slick tongue. Bakugou swallows every moan as his fist works between them, and Hitoshi adds his own hand, dizzied and breathless as the pleasure narrows to one acute point.

He shivers as he cums. Heat spills, gloving their fingers in wetness. A few more tugs and Bakugou adds his mess with a growl, grinding against Hitoshi until his shivers ebb.

In the dark welter of their embrace, Hitoshi tastes heaven.

All too soon, Bakugou sits up.

Hitoshi lifts his white-webbed hand. "You call this putting on the training wheels?"

"Didn't hear any fuckin' complaints."

Dopey with endorphins, they're both too addled to manage the usual sarcasm. Bakugou's sneer is more of a grin.

"Got anything to clean up?"

The discarded shirt is used and then pitched in the laundry. Hitoshi grimaces at the tacky feel of his crotch, but what the hell. He'll survive.

He was right before. As Bakugou leads him back to the living room he can see that, yes, it is every bit as tidy as he had glimpsed. Gray furniture, posters neatly mounted in the empty wall spaces, ashy, dark-stained wood. He's tugged down onto a plush microfiber couch, and he'll be damned if Bakugou — or is he Katsuki, now? — doesn't throw an arm out and coerce him into a snuggle.

"So, what do you want to do now?" he asks.

With the inferno between them briefly dampened, he's feeling tired and lazy.

"Dunno. You're the guest, you fuckin' choose."

Hitoshi doesn't even know what his options are. Nor does he care. There's a remote within easy reach. No reason to get up for a few more minutes, or hours...

He pitches his weight sideways into Bakugou until they're horizontal on the couch, burrowing between Bakugou and the back of the sofa. Is it too possessive of him to sling his leg over Bakugou? Or tuck his cheek against one pec?

He does it anyway. It's exceedingly comfortable.

Bakugou turns on the TV. The volume is too low for Hitoshi to hear much over the steady lub-dub vibrating through his ear, but whatever. This is nice.

He lays there half-drowsing, watching the picture on the screen and comprehending none of it. One show finishes. Another begins. Bakugou’s heart is a steady reverberation, lulling him toward sleep.

Of course he has to go and ruin it.

"So," he says, "am I the first customer of yours to get the full service?"

He hadn't even realized that Bakugou was playing with his hair until the sensation stops. *Ooooh, fuck.* Not the way he meant to ask that. Maybe if he opens his mouth a little wider he can cram the other foot in too.

A snort. "You haven't been a fuckin' customer for months."

The fingers resume their petting. Hitoshi breathes.

“But if you’re tryin’ to fish for gossip: no. I don’t fuck customers and I don’t normally fuck assholes who worm their way into my damn kitchen.”

He likes the sound of that. “Mmm, I’m an exception, then.”

“You’re fuckin’ *persistent* is what you are.”

“Persistent. That’s one way of putting it. Usually I get ‘stubborn’.”

The tingling in his scalp is a pleasant thing. Hitoshi begins his own silent exploration, running his fingertips over Bakugou’s chest.

“I take it as a good thing, though. If I wasn’t so stubborn, I might not be here right now.” Hm, that sounds melodramatic. “I mean. With you. I’d still be here on planet Earth.”

"I know what you mean, nerd. You came back after I banned your ass for a week."

It hadn't ever been verbally confirmed until now that Bakugou remembered that.

"So you *do* remember!"

"Of course I fuckin' remember. How am I supposed to enforce the damn ban if I don't remember who I fuckin' ban?" He huffs. "Fuckin' *mayo*. You hadn't even tasted the damn food."

Hitoshi finds a nipple and toys with it until it peaks. "And yet you fell for me. Looks like stubbornness wins out in the end."

Bakugou flicks him.

"You're a damn smartass, you know that?"

He really is. But Bakugou is too; perhaps that's one reason Hitoshi likes him so well. He can dish out as well as take.

"I've been told."

If he were to shift just a little, he could reach Bakugou's throat. He does. Bakugou's pulse point throbs against his lips.

Why do you like me?

"So, is that what caught your eye? My winning smile?" Hitoshi rolls his thumb once more over Bakugou's nipple. "Or was it my butt? I have it on good authority that you were staring."

"*Deku,"* Bakugou breathes.

"Hitoshi, actually."

That earns him another flick.

"Mmm, definitely my ass, then."

He's skimming the shallow slope from Bakugou's ribs to his abs. So lean. Even relaxing the firmness of Bakugou's muscles is obvious; this is a man used to hard work.

"You do got a fat ass for such a tall, skinny fucker," Bakugou growls, squeezing it.

Seems as though Bakugou doesn't want to divulge just yet. That's fine. If pressed, Hitoshi himself would have difficulty explaining his attraction beyond just the physical. No matter their working relationship, they're still just learning each other.

There are already a few things he knows, though.

He likes the way Bakugou moves. The confidence of his hands as he chops and stirs, or storms across the kitchen.

He likes the way Bakugou smells. Clean and masculine, then a little spicy when he works up a sweat and the deodorant kicks in.

He likes the feel of him.

Bakugou must like the feel of him, too. As Hitoshi continues his

leisurely exploration, so, too, does Bakugou. The hand on his ass, first so greedy, gentles. It pets just above the crease of his buttock, light and ticklish.

It feels nice. So nice that, fifteen minutes later, his eyelids are drooping. He really has become an old man. Nodding off before nine PM? Sheesh. Long gone are the days where midnight was considered *early*.

Better to have a decent sleep schedule, though. Because—

"Exams are coming soon," he finds himself saying.

A grunt.

“I’m going to have to take some time off work to study for them."

"Do what you gotta do."

Hitoshi drags his fingertips along Bakugou's hipbone. Lower. Curls them just below Bakugou's waistband and traces the soft skin just above his groin.

"You gonna miss me?"

Bakugou's belly bounces with an aborted snort. "You kiddin'?"

Hitoshi might be more inclined to believe him if he didn't feel something firming up beneath his thigh.

"Mmm, I think that's a yes."

"You *wish*."

"You sure?"

The hair here is coarse beneath his fingers, like the scouring side of a sponge.

"Greedy fucker," Bakugou breathes.

"Says the guy who had my pants down within five minutes."

"Yeah? And who's the one feeling me up now?"

He is.

It can't be helped. Hitoshi is terminally curious; it's always been what's gotten him into trouble. Though what trouble he can get into with another man's dick in his hands… well. He's going to try to find out.

The rest of the night is a little fuzzy after that.

Izuku isn't here.

It's the first thing Hitoshi notices. Ever since Izuku had returned, he and Bakugou would both arrive at the same time, laden with groceries. This time it's only Bakugou.

Hitoshi takes a handful of the bags in Bakugou's right fist — oof, this must be all the meat — and waits for Bakugou to unlock the door.

"Is Izuku sick?" he asks as Bakugou begins shoving things into the fridge.

There's a brief pause before Bakugou answers. "Nah. He's got physical therapy or somethin' for his hand."

Physical therapy? Hitoshi frowns. He'd seemed perfectly fine before.

"How long will he be off for?"

"A couple hours every other day," Bakugou grunts. "He'll be here around lunch."

Which means that it will be just him and Hitoshi here until about nine, when Iida and Kirishima show up.

Hitoshi recognizes the ingredients. They'll be making cream stew, which is relatively simple. Should be easy enough to prep in time without a third — something Bakugou himself must realize, because partway through chopping potatoes, a warm body molds itself to his back.

“Hey.”

Hitoshi continues to chop. “Hey. Need something?”

He manages to keep the motion of his knife steady as lips press to his neck. “Nope.”

Thock, thock, thock.

He’s gotten rather good at chopping efficiently. Something that Bakugou doesn’t seem to appreciate, from the way he is very clearly attempting to obstruct Hitoshi’s work; kneading Hitoshi’s groin with

gentle, practiced motions.

It becomes impossible to pretend to be unaffected. Bakugou massages him into full hardness, licking and biting at Hitoshi's neck like an animal.

"You sure you don't—" — his knife stutters as Bakugou grinds his erection against his butt— "need something?"

And that's how they lose the first thirty minutes of the day. When Iida and Kirishima arrive, they both seem surprised at how much is still left to do.

"Sorry, I was late," Hitoshi mumbles, keeping his head bent over the carrots he's definitely mangling. He doesn't know if either of those two know what dick breath smells like, but he doesn't trust either of them to not accidentally make some innocent remark. No way he could keep a straight face.

And so on the days Izuku is late, he starts arriving even earlier. Turns out, some things are *great* motivators.

February

Less than two months in, things finally come crashing down.

"Shit, yeah, keep going—"

Hitoshi jerks his hand faster, and lowers his mouth to one fuzzy testicle.

"*Fuck!"* The hand in his hair convulses. The tug hurts a little, but not enough to deter him. He loves how vocal Bakugou is. So vocal, in fact, that Hitoshi doesn't hear someone at the door until it squeaks open.

Both of them freeze. From the living room comes the sound of low voices, then the thump of the door and lock. *Denki and Jirou.* But it's Saturday, not even nine-thirty, why are they here?

His door is closed and locked, thanks to his paranoia, but his libido has just iced over.

“My roommate,” he whispers.

Bakugou rolls one shoulder in a shrug, as if to say *so?* He’s still hard and throbbing in Hitoshi’s hand, apparently undeterred. He doesn’t get why it’s a big deal. *Duh*. Because Hitoshi has never told him.

Hitoshi can tell that he’s close. It would be rude to blue-ball him at this point, so Hitoshi slowly lowers his mouth back to the leaking head of Bakugou’s cock.

“Can you keep quiet?” he asks.

An eye roll. “You kiddin’?”

As it turns out, Bakugou can. Barely. If you count rough curses and harsh breathing as ‘quiet’. The low groan as he empties himself into Hitoshi’s waiting hand certainly isn’t, but the TV is on in the other room now, so it’s probably fine.

What’s not fine is…

“You gotta get going?” he asks the man sprawled on his bed. Said man still has his pants around his ankles, exposed and without a care in the world.

“Yeah, soon,” Bakugou mutters, eyes closed. “M’ beat.”

It's an old habit, or so Hitoshi thinks. The diner, being open every day but Sunday, is Bakugou’s one rest day — though Hitoshi doubts he does anything so indolent as ‘sleeping in’. The man is relentless.

“Do you… want to sleep over?”

One eye cracks open to stare at him.

“I have a spare toothbrush,” Hitoshi continues, a little spooked by his own daring. “And if you want to shower I can lend you some clothes. My roommate won’t care that you’re here.”

Or at least, he shouldn’t, given how often Jirou sleeps over.

Bakugou seems to consider, then closes his eye again. “Nah. Can’t today. Got some financial shit to deal with in the morning with Four-Eyes. Next time.”

Next time.

It doesn't sound like a platitude, so he'll take it.

Bakugou puts himself together, and fifteen minutes later they exit Hitoshi's room. Hitoshi almost thinks they're going to get away with it — the living room is dark, Jirou and Denki tuned in to some movie, but as Bakugou grabs his coat and hat they both look around.

The moment Denki's eyes widen, Hitoshi knows the jig is up. He salutes lazily to them. Jirou nods. Denki continues to stare. Bakugou doesn't seem to notice, too busy putting his shoes on. He's out the door with barely a glance behind him, and Hitoshi saunters after, instantly regretting it when the icy air begins to freeze his bare arms.

Bakugou stops on the landing. "Go back inside, dumbass."

"What, I'm n-not allowed t-to see you off?"

He's already committed to freezing his ass off. It's worth it to get an eyeroll and a sigh as Bakugou unzips his coat and beckons him in.

"You're a fuckin' idiot."

Inside the enfolding circle of Bakugou's arms, it's warm. The cold biting through his socks can't even touch him.

"You like it." Hitoshi steals a kiss, as is his due. "Fine, I won't walk you out. Chivalry is officially dead. Happy?"

"Die in the cold, nerd."

But Bakugou doesn't push him away.

Their goodbye is only mildly protracted. It's too cold outside for either of them to want to linger, and even the impending threat of a Denki explosion can't deter him from the warmth of the apartment. Hitoshi returns, locks the door behind him, and is promptly bombarded.

"*You're dating the asshole from the soup place?!*"

It takes thirty minutes of questions, a few increasingly less-patient requests from Jirou to 'pipe down', and several apologies before Denki is satisfied.

"I still can't believe you lied about it," he grumbles.

"Yeah, I know. Sorry Denks, it was shitty of me. Once I started it kinda snowballed, you know? I didn't know how to bring it up."

Bagheera is a warm, purring lump on his lap. At least someone's happy. Denki isn't the sort to hold a grudge, so Hitoshi doesn't think he'll be in the doghouse for too long, but it doesn't ease his guilt.

"This is partially your fault, you know," Jirou says, poking her boyfriend's shoulder.

"What? Me?"

“Yeah, you. I bet he’d have told you if he didn’t think you’d tease him to death about it.”

That is *exactly* why he did it, but Hitoshi won’t tell Denki that. His reasoning doesn’t excuse his lies.

Denki pouts. “That’s so mean! Who’s side are you on?”

His pouting seems to have as much effect on Jirou as it does on Hitoshi. Her expression doesn’t waver. Instead she turns to Hitoshi, ignoring Denki’s quivering lower lip. “So you two have been dating? What’s his name?”

“Bakugou Katsuki. We've been seeing each other for about a month.”

She swats at the hands creeping around her waist. “Nice. Well, if you two ever wanna join up with our D&D group, we’ll be starting a new campaign this week or next.”

“Kyoukaaaa—”

In the end, Denki does forgive him.

Hitoshi’s promise of sharing the soup he brings home may factor into it only a little.

A date.

A Date.

He and Bakugou have never been on a proper date.

Sure, he'd invited Bakugou over for a movie and called it a date. That had really just been an excuse to get Bakugou alone in a private place. It hadn't been a *real* date; the kind where you get dressed up and go out together, floundering through awkward small talk and trying to eat yakisoba without slopping sauce all over your chin.

Okay, maybe he's got a pretty specific idea of what a date is.

At this point, it isn't about getting over the awkwardness. It's about seeing Bakugou in the wild. Doing something with him outside of the confines of the diner or their apartments. And Hitoshi knows just the thing.

"Ice skating?"

"Yeah. You in?"

The rhythm of Bakugou's knife slows briefly, then picks back up. "Sure. Watching you fall on your ass all evening sounds like fun."

If he wasn't on the opposite side of the kitchen, Hitoshi would kick him. "Asshole. I'm *good* at ice skating, just so you know."

It really is as easy as that.

Ice skating was a fucking stupid idea.

Hitoshi wobbles around the edge of the rink grimly, dodging the kids careening all over the ice and hanging off the handrails. Or, trying to dodge. He can dodge the ones he can see, but that doesn't do jack shit for the brats overtaking him from behind.

One such brat hurtles past. The edge of his skate knocks Hitoshi's mid-stride, and it's all over. He flops to the ice in an ungainly pile. Again.

"I thought you said you were *good*?" Bakugou taunts as he laps Hitoshi. He's gone too quickly for Hitoshi to do anything but flip off his retreating back. Hitoshi is still struggling to get to his feet by the time Bakugou's completed another lap, and cold flecks of ice shower

him as Bakugou does some stupid sliding stop right next to him.

Hitoshi takes the proffered hand, resisting the urge to yank Bakugou down with him. “I *was* good.”

He does not mention that the last time he ice skated was approximately twelve years and half a meter ago.

“What were you comparing yourself to? Toddlers?”

“Babies, actually.”

Bakugou’s hand feels hot after the chill of the ice. Hitoshi is loath to let it go. So he doesn’t. And, miracle of miracles, Bakugou doesn’t shake him off; he just rolls his eyes and pushes off, towing Hitoshi along like a large and clumsy child.

With Bakugou’s support, he finds he can penguin-waddle along steadily enough to pass the slowest kids. They skate in long, lazy ovals. Stop. Watch the Zamboni shave and then resurface the rink to a perfect, glistening finish, then hop back on to enjoy it for two minutes before the rest of the public gouges it all to hell.

Hitoshi has enough confidence by the end to skate unaided. He lets Bakugou take a few unfettered laps, shaking his head ruefully at the fluid way Bakugou cuts across the ice, even with his hands stuffed in his pockets. Of course he’s good at this. He’s beginning to think that there isn’t much that Bakugou *isn’t* good at — except maybe not being an asshole, but that’s one fault they share. Besides...

“You wanna get out of here?” he asks an hour after they arrive.

“Yeah.”

“Your place?”

“Fuckin’ right.”

There’s one more skill he’d like to test tonight.

He isn't nervous. Nope. Not at all. It's excitement that has his heart knocking against his ribs even before Bakugou steals the first kiss of

the night right there in the genkan. Excitement swirling in his gut like white foam rapids. Excitement, like—

"Gotta use the bathroom," Hitoshi mumbles against Bakugou's lips, and rushes off to it.

Well, this is embarrassing.

He huddles on Bakugou's toilet, listening to the shower fan whir. Nothing comes out. Of course it doesn't. He'd spent half of last night on the porcelain throne, courtesy of a bottle of grape-flavored magnesium citrate, and another half hour on the enema. Stupid plan. His gut has been in knots all day. Shoulda gone with *just* an enema, but no. Not Hitoshi. He's gotta be *extra* prepared.

His gut calms. He does a quick last wash with a squeeze bulb full of tap water and then trudges out fifteen minutes later, sheepish and uncomfortably damp below. Bakugou is in the living room, scrolling through his phone.

He looks up. "You good?"

"Yeah."

He *is* good. Bakugou has been nothing but courteous — in his own, rough way — until now. It will be fine.

And maybe, just maybe, he's nervous too.

Hitoshi leans over the back of the sofa and kisses him.

Hands in his hair. A hot body pressing him into the mattress. Hitoshi's mouth is full of Bakugou's tongue. He whimpers as Bakugou grinds down on him; the friction of their jeans is not nearly enough.

"Fuck m*mm*—" is all he manages before Bakugou's lips muffle him. It's enough.

They part. Bakugou has his own clothes off before Hitoshi even manages to wriggle out of his jeans. He's fighting with his zipper, which is hung up on his stupid fucking erection, god dammit—

"Lemme do that."

And Bakugou does, deftly coaxing the zipper down. Hitoshi is too busy staring. He's never seen Bakugou fully naked before.

He's beautiful.

Of course he is.

The man who can do anything *would* have the body of Adonis; muscular dips and curves painted in lovely chiaroscuro by the yellow lamplight. Hitoshi is nothing in comparison. He hasn't touched a dumbbell in years and he's gone soft around the middle. But, as he strips out of his underwear, Bakugou's eyes travel the length of him, dark and hungry. Wanting him. *Savoring* him.

"Get on your knees."

He prickles all over at the sound of that. *Oh, shit.*

Hitoshi rolls onto his knees. Rough hands squeeze his ass, baring him to the light, and he winces. He's never been scrutinized like *this* before.

A finger prods his anus. "You prepped?"

He must feel the dampness. Hitoshi nods.

"You're a real thorough kinda guy, aren't ya? Must've been the teacher's pet in every class."

Hitoshi gives him a big, fat, middle finger.

Bakugou prods him again, slower this time. Hitoshi is quite sure he can feel himself opening beneath the drag of Bakugou's thumb. "Well, teacher's pet, guess you've earned your fuckin' reward."

Okay, that is *not* going to become a Thing.

"For fucks sake, just call me Hitoshi like a normal—"

Like a normal *what* never gets answered, because Bakugou's tongue is on his asshole.

A stupid, inhuman sound tears from his throat. Oh fuck. Oh shit. Oh fuck oh shit oh my god he had *never* expected it to feel like *that*, how the hell can that have so many nerve endings—

His face hits the mattress. He whines again as Bakugou palms his cock and stabs at his asshole with a warm, wet tongue, rolling and teasing and rubbing and *fuck!*

He doesn't know how long the tongue works him open. The only thing he knows that it feels like heaven but it sounds like Bakugou is slopping chowder straight out of a bowl, and oh my god that is going to ruin soup for him forever—

The tongue is eventually replaced with a finger. One slick, cool digit that slides in easily, then a second that slides in less easily. There's a bit of a burn with the second, and especially the third finger, but that's okay, a hint of pain is nice to take the edge off the tension building in his groin. Those fingers curl and rub. His prostate. That's what Bakugou is aiming for, and Hitoshi thinks he's hitting it — there's warmth and tingling at the tip of his cock, none of the lightning bolts of pleasure the dudes writhing around in pornos seem to be experiencing, but it's good. Better than good.

A crinkle of plastic, then the fingers are gone.

"Roll over."

Hitoshi obeys like a good dog. He's too brain-dead and dazed to do anything but. Bakugou is smearing lube on his cock, which is glossy and red even through the condom, then he's nudging Hitoshi's legs apart, folding his thighs back — oh, he didn't know he was that flexible — and something hot and huge is poking his anus.

All the prep in the world can't take the sting away. Hitoshi does his best to bear it. The head pops through, then more, and more, a burn more acute than the fingers. Bakugou stops.

"You good?"

"Yeah," Hitoshi mutters through clenched teeth.

Bakugou stays frozen. He kneads his thumbs into Hitoshi's hamstrings, and it isn't until then that Hitoshi realizes he's locked up every muscle.

"Relax."

He tries. The thumbs rub, a slow, patient movement. Gradually the burn fades. He nods.

Bakugou pushes the rest of the way in. By the time his hips meet Hitoshi's ass, Hitoshi is sweating.

"Still okay?"

Hitoshi is glad he isn't the only one that sounds undone. Bakugou's voice is rough with strain; this has got to be a special kind of torture for him, too.

"Yeah."

Bakugou huffs. "Dunno if I believe you."

"Guess we're gonna be stuck here forever, then."

Amazing. Even balls-deep in him, Bakugou has the audacity to roll his eyes. Bastard.

And then suddenly, he's empty.

The lube cap snaps. Bakugou squeezes another dollop into his palm, slicks, rubs the leftovers onto Hitoshi, then lines himself up again. This time when he sinks in the burn is milder. He sets a slow pace. In. Out. In. Out. Getting Hitoshi used to the stretch. It gets old after about two minutes.

"God, my *grandma* can fuck faster than that."

He gasps when Bakugou sneers and slams his hips forward. "Yeah? You ready to get pounded, then?"

"Bring it, *Kacchan,"* his stupid, traitorous mouth says.

Oh, shit. Now he's gonna get it. The tension is a thundercloud, black and heavy with threat as Bakugou withdraws all but the tip. He smirks cruelly.

And sinks back in even slower.

"Oh, fuck you."

"Nah, *I'm* gonna fuck *you*, but I'm doin' it on my terms you fuckin' masochist." Bakugou sighs as he thrusts again. "You're gonna scream tonight, but it ain't gonna be cuz I hurt you."

"I'm not really a — a screamer," Hitoshi says, shivering as warmth blooms at the tip of his cock.

Bakugou pauses. Slides his hips forward again, and the warmth becomes a tingle.

"Yeah? We'll see about that."

As it turns out, he isn't a screamer.

He keeps his mouth too occupied for that, but he can't stop the torrent of low grunts and groans as Bakugou fucks him into the mattress.

Hitoshi sucks Bakugou's neck viciously, shuddering as each thrust strokes him inside and out. He's so fucking close. He digs his heels into Bakugou's rump, urging him in, in, *in*, and fuck does that make him a needy little bottom bitch to be clinging to his boyfriend's hips like a spider monkey on crack? Oh, who the fuck cares. He just wants to come. Come with Bakugou *inside* him.

So he will. But he's not going to do it without taking Bakugou with him.

Hitoshi wiggles one hand between them, jerking himself furiously in time with Bakugou's thrusts.

"M' gonna cum," he gasps as the pleasure sharpens to a point.

"Fuck yeah," Bakugou rasps. "Fuckin' cum on my cock, fuckin' *do it*— "

This time it's Hitoshi muffling him with his mouth. He gets one sloppy kiss in between pants and meets that vibrant red gaze.

"*Katsuki—"*

It might be a dirty, underhanded trick, but it works. He holds out just long enough to feel Bakugou's cock pulse, then he tips over the edge himself and loses track of everything.

"Hey."

Something pokes him.

"You good?"

Another poke. Hitoshi cracks open one eye to see Bakugou sprawled next to him, looking as smug as a cat who's eaten a canary.

"Mmm."

"Oi." Poke. "Did I fuck out what little brains you got?"

Hitoshi bats clumsily at the offending finger. "Excuse me, I'm *trying* to bask in the afterglow here."

"Bask after you get cleaned up. I don't want jizz on my bed."

He looks down. The mess on his stomach is starting to go watery, oozing down his side towards the black comforter. "Not my fault you didn't put a towel down."

A wad of Kleenex mops up the drips threatening the bed, then approaches his face. Hitoshi snatches it away. He cleans himself up.

Later, showered and brushed at Bakugou's insistence, they lay in bed together. Hitoshi is pillowed comfortably on Bakugou's chest, lacing and unlacing their fingers because well, apparently that's the kind of romantic sap he is.

"Was it good?" Bakugou rumbles.

"You couldn't tell from all the moaning?"

A hand squeezes his rump, earning another groan. Even with all the lube, he's sore. "Just had to check you weren't fuckin' faking it."

"I think you just want your ego stroked."

And what an ego it is. Completely substantiated, too.

"...Yeah. It was good."

Satisfaction radiates off Bakugou in the silence. Hitoshi continues to play, turning Bakugou's hand palm-up on his chest. The white of a scar gleams. He runs his thumb over the flesh, smooth as candle wax.

"What's this from?" he asks, because he has to ruin every good thing.

Bakugou doesn't even hesitate. "Carpal tunnel surgery."

Carpal tunnel?

He remembers the scar's twin on Bakugou's other wrist. "Both hands?"

"Yeah."

"Aren't you a bit young for that?"

"Obviously fuckin' not."

He knows Denki occasionally complains about his wrists if he's at his piano for too long, but Bakugou really doesn't strike him as the instrumental type. "What, you jerked it so much you got it on both sides?"

Bakugou flicks his ass. "No, you damn troll. I got it from using my quirk."

And that's the second mention of Bakugou's elusive quirk. Explosions. Carpal tunnel. ...He can see that.

"Some kind of overuse injury?"

"Yeah. Kept giving me tendonitis that wouldn't go away."

There it is again. Hitoshi has always heard that people's bodies are meant to adapt to their quirks, but Bakugou is hardly the first instance to prove that hypothesis wrong. Izuku's broken hand. Denki's career path. Is this why Bakugou is no longer a hero?

"Your quirk hurts you, huh."

Bakugou does not answer, but the muscles in his palm flex minutely. Maybe a tense topic.

"I have a friend who had problems kinda like that," he says, stroking the scar again. "Denki, my roommate, wanted to be a hero. His quirk is electrification. He can make a *lot* of electricity — he told me up to a million volts, but I think he might just be exaggerating — but if he uses it too much or for too long it makes him kinda... dopey. For like, fifteen minutes to an hour after."

An idiot. It *makes* him a useless, cheery idiot, but even Hitoshi isn't

mean enough to say that. He's saying enough already; this is Denki's story to tell, not his, but he wants Bakugou to hear it.

"He told me the doctors said if he does that too much he might be risking permanent brain damage. So he decided to go into music instead of being a hero."

He laces his fingers back through Bakugou's, squeezing their palms together. Bakugou is silent. The question hangs between them unanswered.

Why aren't you a hero?

Eventually, Bakugou speaks.

"Your friend made the right decision. Being a hero ain't all it's cracked up to be."

Hitoshi doesn't know what to say to that. And he doesn't have to say anything; Bakugou rolls on his side, away from him, but snags his wrist as he goes. They end up spooning. Bakugou clicks the lamp off.

Snuggled up like this, he knows Bakugou isn't mad at him, but an impression of distance remains. The Bakugou in his arms is drifting somewhere he can't touch. It takes minutes — or is it hours, the dark is thick as molasses oozing through his tired mind — of idle silence and his fingers creeping between Bakugou's before he comes back to Hitoshi.

He won't bring it up again.

"You alright, Shin?"

He doesn't glance up from his book. The smirk in that sing-song tone is already apparent. "Yeah."

"You sure?"

"Uh huh. Why?"

"Saw you were walkin' kinda funny so I had to ask, y'kno—"

He hooks Denki with his quirk just long enough to back him out of the bedroom and shut the door behind him.

"You're a jerk, anyone ever tell you that?" Denki says through the wood, completely unfazed.

Hitoshi pulls his knees towards his chest, even though it intensifies the ache in his ass. He's grinning like a loon. "I know."

Izuku continues to arrive late. Probably a good thing. They're getting better at not spending the first thirty minutes of the day necking, but the temptation is always there.

Instead, they've gotten better at just… talking.

When they're alone, at times it's like Bakugou is just a normal person. The tough guy act disappears. He still teases Hitoshi mercilessly and bitches about having to wear high-necked shirts — Hitoshi often gets carried away — but he really is just… Bakugou.

Then the lunch rush arrives, and the drill sergeant appears. Oh well.

They start spending more evenings together. Alternating, depending on how late they work or how tired the other is — he's even gotten Bakugou to sleep over once or twice, though Denki still can't seem to stop staring whenever Bakugou is over. Jirou is thoughtful enough to drag him out of the apartment on occasion; a favor returned, since Hitoshi has often sequestered himself in the library to give them privacy. Bakugou seems to have a *thing* for getting him hot and bothered at the worst times.

"What are you, some kind of exhibitionist?" Hitoshi hisses. His door isn't even locked, for fuck's sake!

Denki laughs at something on the TV, just one room over.

Bakugou just sucks harder. Hitoshi muffles himself with a pillow and lets it happen.

“Mmm, thanks for giving me the day off, boss,” Hitoshi mumbles into Bakugou's chest.

“It’s a fuckin’ national holiday. You think I wanna work?”

It’s mid-morning. Instead of slaving over a cutting board, they’re both sprawled on Hitoshi’s sofa like sleepy meerkats, limbs thrown over limbs in a warm tangle.

“And here I thought you were a total slavedriver.”

“I *can* dock your fuckin’ paycheck, you know.”

Bakugou’s teasing lacks any heat. In fact, the only heat is the growing pool of warmth against Hitoshi’s belly, where Bakugou’s cock is beginning to stir. So greedy. They’ve both already come once today.

Bakugou jolts when Denki’s door creaks open. Hitoshi doesn’t move. He knows Denki’s routine. Indeed, a few seconds later the bathroom door closes and the fan hums to life, followed shortly by the sound of water pattering against the shower floor.

When Denki emerges, damp and still sleepy-eyed, neither of them have budged.

“Mornin’,” Hitoshi grunts. It’s eleven.

Even though he’s slept most of the morning away, there’s no post-sleep haze. Not for Denki. He’s as bright and chipper as a squirrel on speed.

“Morning, you two! No work today?”

“Obvi—”

“Nope.” Hitoshi cuts over Bakugou, finally forcing himself off his comfortable pec-pillow. “Golden Day.”

“Ohhhhh yeah! I almost forgot!”

Golden Day. Aka, the most controversial holiday in existence: the day the first quirk appeared. Hitoshi hadn’t really cared to think about it too much growing up — another day off from school could only be a good thing — but as he’d gotten older he’d become aware of the criticisms. Mostly surrounding the festivals that have sprung up

around the day. Is the advent of an enormous deceleration in human progress something to be *celebrated?*

Denki emerges from the kitchen with last night's leftovers. "You two gonna go to the campus festival?"

He looks at Bakugou. Bakugou looks back. He hadn't really planned to, but getting out of the apartment doesn't sound half bad, and tickets are cheap…

"Can't believe you fuckin' dragged me to this."

Somehow, Hitoshi doesn't believe his bitching. It might have something to do with the fingers entwined in his, and the slack swing of their arms as they trail Denki and Jirou past brightly-colored stalls.

"Will it make you feel better if I win you a teddy bear?"

…The eyeroll is really unnecessary.

They end up losing Denki and Jirou in the crowd. It's a pretty incredible turnout; everyone seems to want to take advantage of the warming winds, threatening spring. Hitoshi is just glad to be out. It's nice to walk and look at the bright lights, smell the aroma of hot, oily food floating out of stalls every few feet — even if Bakugou bitches about the cooking methods.

"They don't need that much fuckin' oil, holy shit. It's like they're trying to give everyone a damn heart attack."

Well, guess that means karaage is out.

Hitoshi buys himself some yakitori, and, after some insistence, a skewer of ikayaki for Bakugou. He scarfs the steaming chicken, trying not to dribble sauce down his chin and watching Bakugou pick at his squid, gratified when the bites become bigger.

"Not *that* bad, was it?" he teases.

Bakugou chucks the bare skewer at him.

Around eight is when the fireworks start. Hitoshi is drawn to them;

he's never much cared for fireworks before, but they have a special place in his heart now. He wonders if Bakugou feels the same.

They join the small crowd drifting towards the hill the festival is backed up against, clutching skewers of tomorokoshi and Hitoshi, a fat, custard cream taiyaki — what? He's allowed his guilty pleasures — taking a spot near a stand of trees. There they huddle, shoulders rubbing. The corn is buttery and sweet-spicy. Fireworks bloom like bright dandelions, sparking in primary colors.

Like heathens, they discard their cobs in the bushes. By the time Hitoshi finishes his taiyaki the fireworks are reaching their volatile peak. There's a rapid succession of booms. Simultaneous bursts of red and blue, and then a final shower of gold sparks which trail down through the air like rain on pane glass, still glowing.

A cool grip seizes his chin. Bakugou eclipses the sky, tongue lapping over the corner of his mouth.

"Got some of that cream shit all over your lips," he mutters, and then kisses Hitoshi properly.

He remembers.

As much as he's enjoying his new relationship, Hitoshi *has* to mandate distance.

Finals are here.

Well, they will be here. Hitoshi has about two weeks, but he's taken off work the entire way up to them. He's so damn far behind.

It's fucking *torture.*

He has to struggle to concentrate. His mind finds much more agreeable rabbit holes than signaling pathways and neurotransmitter imbalances to disappear down.

Bakugou's pants, for one.

The raw desire between them cannot be ignored. In the days before his mandated leave, it had been impossible to keep their hands off

each other. More than once he'd felt a pinch on his ass as Bakugou squeezed past him in the kitchen. More than once he'd copped a feel of his own. To his chagrin, he now pops a boner at the scent of Comet cleaner; courtesy of one sudden, messy handjob after close one evening.

He'd gotten the distinct idea that everyone knew. Closing had been expedited. What had been a more casual, chatty affair is now finished in fifteen brisk minutes, then everyone is out the door (Kirishima with a wink, Izuku with a knowing look, Iida with no expression at all) leaving him and Bakugou alone. He felt a little bad. He *does* like talking to them. But he won't complain about having some extra time to...

Hitoshi realizes he's been staring at the same line in the text for the past five minutes, and is dangerously close to pitching a tent right here in the living room. Denki will not appreciate that. His grades will not appreciate it either. He shifts his book from the coffee table onto his lap.

Oh boy. He can already tell this is going to be a fun couple of weeks.

It sucks.

It sucks *ass.*

It sucks more than any other finals have ever sucked.

On top of missing his boyfriend, the very world has conspired to make him miserable. The thaw is here. Spring unfolds out his window in fits and starts, gloomy, overcast days interspersed with the first budding patches of green in grass and trees. The air warms. Birds begin to sing in the early mornings. It's like they're taunting him.

He'd rather be outside or hanging out with Bakugou or a combination of the two. But, he can't. Time is precious. His few free hours must be strictly rationed because: finals are coming.

He's trying very, very hard to not think about finals.

Too bad Denki isn't trying to do the same.

"Dude, I'm so ready to get these tests over with."

Hitoshi 'mmm's and highlights another definition.

"Once finals are done, all we have left is to walk across that stage! Isn't that crazy?"

Looking back at the page, Hitoshi realizes he's highlighted over half of the notes he's written. Ugh. He caps the highlighter.

And realizes he hasn't answered Denki.

"Uh… yeah, it kinda is."

He's really hoping Denki is going to go back to working on whatever composition he's been banging away at for the last hour, but no dice. Denki spins around on his stool, apparently ready for a distraction.

"You got something lined up for after you graduate?'

"Mmmm, not really."

"Yeah, I guess you already have a job." Denki pooches out his lower lip. "I've been trying to get an internship here in town, but I think Jirou wants to go to a bigger city."

"You gonna follow her?"

"Mannnn… I dunno. Probably. What about you? Gonna stay in town and keep working at your boyfriend's diner?"

That's still firmly in the realm of Things He's Deliberately Not Thinking About, so Hitoshi shrugs.

"Holy shit!" Denki suddenly smacks his fist into his palm, surprising Hitoshi. "I have the *best* idea. You two could partner up! He runs the restaurant and you open up a little practice across the street offering therapy sessions to all the people he kicks out! I bet you'd make a killing!"

"...No."

"Aw c'mon. You gotta admit it's a genius idea."

"You're ridiculous."

"You're just jealous you didn't think of it first."

This is one of the reasons Denki is his best friend. He can read Hitoshi like a book.

They detour away from the threatening topic of the future and back into safer, shallower waters.

He's done.

Two damn weeks of pomodoroing all hours of the day and sucking down Dodekamin's for an extra boost have dissolved in a blur of exhaustion. He can barely even remember taking the exams. Probably he's repressing them. But it doesn't really matter because he's done. *Done!*

"Fuck finals," Hitoshi announces to the room at large.

He's finished his last test and then, instead of heading home to drown his sorrows in pizza, like every other post-test crash, he went straight for the diner. It's late by the time he gets there. Only thirty more minutes til close, and the last dregs of customers are still trickling through. Having arrived through the back door, Kirishima is the only one there to see him.

"Hey, dude! You're done?"

"Yes. Thank fuck."

Hitoshi checks the washroom. It's under control. They don't really need his help, since it's so slow right now, so he doesn't even bother to mark his timesheet. Instead he begins to bus the leisurely trickle of dirty dishes — that is, until Izuku takes the tub from him.

"You came straight from a test, right?" he says, gesturing towards an empty table where a tray of food sits.

Bless him. Bless *them.*

Hitoshi digs his spoon into the bowl and lifts the first mouthful of hot butajiru to his lips. So damn good. After subsisting on ramen cups and aging fruit, he's forgotten what real food tastes like.

Bakugou meets his eyes. Hitoshi shovels in another spoonful of savory

broth and gives an approving nod. Bakugou smirks and serves the next patron. *Smug asshole*. God, Hitoshi loves him.

He chokes on his next bite and begins to cough.

Once the meal is done and everything is down the correct pipe, he helps close, then says his goodbyes. Bakugou cocks his head towards the door. They beat the familiar path to Hitoshi's bicycle, then head to Bakugou's apartment.

No sooner has he removed his shoes than he's dragged — literally *dragged* — and thrown on Bakugou's bed.

"You ace your tests?" Bakugou growls between kisses.

Pinned beneath the onslaught of a warm, eager mouth, Hitoshi can only nod. 'Ace' is a relative term; if his only goal is to pass, well then he's done it, right?

"Guess you deserve a reward, then."

Bakugou and his 'rewards'. Just the word has his dick perking in response; it's like he's a damn dog drooling over a piece of meat. Probably an apt comparison. He's pretty sure that this reward involves *some* kind of meat.

Bakugou divests him of clothes. Hitoshi returns the favor. Only, just as he goes to close his teeth on a nipple, Bakugou pushes away.

"Gimme a sec."

He disappears.

Hitoshi gives him a sec. He gives him *several* seconds. Seconds turn into minutes, until he digs through his discarded clothes for his phone. What the heck. Did he fall in?

Finally Bakugou returns.

"Everything come out okay?" Hitoshi jokes.

Bakugou crosses the room in two pounding steps and kisses him.

He melts. Bakugou's tongue plunges into his mouth, and he springs back into full arousal so quickly he's dizzied by it.

He grunts when Bakugou lands in his lap, then again when his back

hits the mattress. Bakugou is heavy on him, a devouring whirlwind ravaging him from lips to throat; he's quite certain he'll need to wear a turtleneck tomorrow or, hell, the whole damn week.

When cool slickness suddenly engulfs his cock, he starts. Bakugou is coating him in a palmful of lube he's squeezed from god-knows-where, and god knows Hitoshi doesn't really care. All that matters is Bakugou. Bakugou, sweat-sheened and naked, crouching over him like a sleek jungle predator, devouring him like the same, and—

He gasps.

Bakugou smirks fiercely at him, slitted eyes glowing. "Yeah? You like that?"

He rocks his hips down again. Hitoshi sinks further into squeezing warmth.

"You—" he starts, choking on the words. "You're—"

"That's right."

Breath hisses through Bakugou's teeth as he humps his hips down onto Hitoshi's cock.

"I'm not—" Hitoshi tries again, and short-circuits under the sensation. God, just *spit it out!* "A condom! I'm not wearing—"

"Yeah, I know. I'm lettin' you rawdog me."

Oh, god, does he *have* to say it like that? Bakugou has no reverence for the importance of this moment: Hitoshi's loss of his *other* virginity.

Bakugou's ass is flush with his hips. He heaves a deep, shuddering breath that Hitoshi can actually *feel* from within. "Fuuuuuuck. That's a workout." He licks his lips. "You got a fat damn cock, Hitoshi."

"Thank you," Hitoshi squeaks.

Wait. Hitoshi.

Hitoshi.

Bakugou lifts up and drops back down, and his brain liquifies.

"Fuck—"

Oh my god. Oh fuck. Oh shit. He can't. He can't even fucking *think*, not with Bakugou writhing on his lap like a demon or a damn incubus, every shadow of his movements broken into fractals on the lamp-lit wall. He can't look. Not at the dark place where they're joined. Not at Bakugou's eyes, not for too long, lest the undisguised pleasure there trigger an eruption.

Bakugou stills, panting.

"Gonna make me do all the fuckin' work?"

Oh. Oh, yeah.

Hitoshi rolls them over. Does as Bakugou had done to him, folding Bakugou's legs up towards his head until Bakugou is bent nearly in half, flexible as a cat.

Beautiful.

He wants it to be as good for Bakugou as it has been for him.

Out and then in, he rocks his hips slowly. Searching. Buying time so he doesn't blow his load embarrassingly soon. And—

There.

Bakugou's eyes pinch shut, cock twitching against his stomach. Hitoshi thrusts again. Another twitch. Bakugou squeezes around him as he does it over and over, fascinated by the response.

"You're a damn tease," Bakugou groans. "C'mon and fuck me like you mean it!"

"And you call *me* demanding?"

Instead of smacking him, Bakugou just grabs his hips and yanks him all the way in.

Hitoshi decides to oblige him.

Unfortunately he's not going to last long. Not buried in this hungry, wet, heat, not with Bakugou's wanton groans echoing in his ears. He lunges for a kiss. Bakugou rises to meet him. He anchors Hitoshi to him with a firm hand at his nape and a crushing squeeze of thighs around his waist, so tight that Hitoshi can't even tell where he ends and Bakugou begins.

He moans desperately against Bakugou's mouth. That's all the warning he can offer, but Bakugou seems to understand.

"*Harder*," he snarls. "Come in me, *c'mon*— "

Hitoshi wants to. He desperately wants to, but he clings to the precipice by the skin of his teeth. Not yet. Not until—

He worms his hand into the hot, sweaty cavern on their bodies. Finds the rigid heat of Bakugou's cock and jerks with no finesse, until Bakugou swears and buries his teeth into Hitoshi's shoulder. He *clenches.*

They fall together.

"Oi. Is this gonna be a thing with you every time? Get up."

Hitoshi doesn't see why he should. Katsuki is warm beneath him, the heat of his insides snug around his softening cock.

"I'm gonna make you clean the fuckin' comforter if I drip all over it."

Ugh. Okay, fine.

He sits up, withdraws delicately — and is helpless to stop the rill of white that spills out of Katsuki's ass.

"Goddamn it."

Warm and shower-damp, Hitoshi slings an arm around Katsuki's waist and snuggles up behind him.

"So… how was it?"

A question he should really know better than to ask. The answer will probably be crude:

"Fuckin' gross. I'm gonna be farting your cum the rest of the night."

Rude:

"You lasted more than a minute, so good fuckin' job I guess."

Or a combination of the two.

To his surprise, it's none of these things.

"Who's wanting their ego stroked now, huh?" Katsuki mumbles, sounding half-asleep.

"Not me, clearly."

"Tch."

A beat of silence, then:

"Felt good." His hand squeezes Hitoshi's. "Might even let you do it again soon."

Lavish praise, from Katsuki. Hitoshi understands now the visceral pride that comes from pleasing a partner. If he were a cat, he'd be purring.

He melts into Katsuki's bed, at peace with the world. Finals done. Sated. Arms full of a warm and willing boyfriend. He wonders if this had been Katsuki's plan all along; his own way to sublimate the stress of Hitoshi's hellish week.

He nuzzles Katsuki's neck. "Thank you."

Katsuki turns back. "The fuck are you thanking me f—"

Hitoshi kisses him. Laps up the words with lazy swipes of his tongue until Katsuki acquiesces, rolling over to face him. They kiss languidly in the darkness. Tenderness burns strangely in his chest; a swelling bubble of heat like hot smoke. His cock stiffens.

"Tryna butter me up for another round?" Katsuki rasps.

No, actually. This erection is fueled by pure emotion, but how the hell does he explain that?

"Mmm, no. But if you insist..."

He kisses Katsuki again, and the rest of the evening is swallowed in warmth.

The next morning, there's the faintest, almost unnoticeable hitch to Katsuki's gait. Hitoshi grins like a damn fool, but keeps his mouth shut.

Katsuki smacks him anyway.

March

Chilis and heartier stews are exchanged for french spring soup and bowls laden with root vegetables in thin, fragrant broth. Katsuki's repertoire of recipes is truly something to behold. And the *variety*; he arrives every morning with a haul of fresh snow peas, leeks — a seasonal banquet from radishes to eggplant. One of these days Hitoshi is going to be masochistic enough to ask to accompany him on his grocery runs. He can only imagine what that's like.

"You okay, Shinsou?"

He blinks, realizing he's spaced off in the middle of chopping leeks. "Oh, yeah. Just thinking about a paper."

Izuku's smile is impish. Wisely, he doesn't say anything; Katsuki is within earshot.

Smug bastard. He seems almost more pleased than they are about their relationship. But at least he, unlike Kirishima, keeps his opinions to himself. Kirishima had earned a whole two days of the stink eye after he'd remarked:

"I knew he'd chill out if he got laid more regularly! Nice work, dude!"

It might have been a little better for him if he hadn't whisper-screamed it, or given Hitoshi such a vigorous double thumbs-up. But he had. At least the resultant yelling had distracted everyone from Hitoshi's blushing.

They’re all absolutely ridiculous. And he likes them for that. And he knows Katsuki likes them for that; even though he blusters and plays at aloofness, Hitoshi can see the true harmony between him and everyone else shining like the sun through a bank of clouds.

Of course he has to go and fuck it up.

The question comes like lightning out of the clear blue.

"What're you doing after graduation?"

Hitoshi, midway between stuffing another portion of hot noodles into his mouth, chews slowly to buy time to answer. It doesn't help. His reply is the same one he gave Denki weeks ago.

"I'm not really sure."

Katsuki raises an eyebrow at him. "You serious?"

"Yeah."

"You're not planning on being a shrink or something?"

"No, not really."

"Ain't you majoring in psych?"

He pinches noodles between his chopsticks and lifts them from the broth, blowing the steam away. "I am."

The look grows even more nonplussed. That's right; Katsuki hadn't been present during the discussion with Kirishima and Iida — he hadn't known about Hitoshi's long-standing indecision.

Only, unlike them and Denki, he won't be waylaid by distraction.

"Why'd you pick the major if you ain't even interested in it?"

This sounds like the beginning of a long discussion. His ramen is going to get cold. He considers stuffing the rest of it in, but his appetite is waning and Katsuki has long since finished his own portion. He sets the bowl aside.

"It's not that I'm not interested in it, it's just that I'm not really sure what I want to *do* with it."

Bakugou snorts. “Sounds like somethin’ you shoulda thought about before now.”

“Yeah, probably.”

Plenty of his other classmates are already sending out job applications or setting up internships. It’s what Hitoshi’s own academic advisor had recommended. He’d just ignored it; how could he even begin applications if he can’t narrow down his options? Besides, he has a job.

“Gotta say, you sound *real* fuckin’ excited about it.”

He does heavy sarcasm even better than Jirou. “Yeah. You know me, I’m a very excitable person.”

That earns a hint of a grin, but no response. But it doesn’t feel like the discussion is over. Katsuki’s eyes are narrowed as he watches Hitoshi, head tilted like he’s trying to figure something out. Hitoshi steals another bite of ramen. It’s pretty damn good for a cheap brick of noodles dressed up with fresh veggies and an egg.

Katsuki’s head tilts the other way. “What did you wanna be when you were growing up?”

Oh boy.

He licks his lips, realizes it’s a fucking nervous tic, and hopes Katsuki just thinks he’s licking up broth. He shouldn’t be nervous. It’s Katsuki. Katsuki, who was, apparently, once a hero. He’s already achieved Hitoshi’s dream; surely he wouldn’t laugh.

“A hero.”

Katsuki doesn’t even blink. “A hero, huh. What changed?”

“Uh… nothing, really. Guess I just decided my quirk wasn’t really suited for hero work.”

Katsuki wrinkles his nose. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s fuckin’ bullshit.”

Hitoshi blinks. The tone isn't vehement, but the response isn't what he expects. "What?"

"I said, that's fuckin' bullshit."

He doesn't follow. "Why?"

A sneer. "We had a kid in our class whose quirk was pulling fuckin' sticky hairballs off his head. If some extra with a shitty quirk like that can make it into the top hero course, no fuckin' way someone like you couldn't."

He can't really tell if that's a compliment or not. Better to take it as one. And did he say *sticky hairballs?* "Yeah… I guess. It's just—" Well, fuck. It isn't really about his quirk. It's about all the possible fallout that could come from it. "It's not just my quirk. It's…"

God, how can he find the words? Katsuki is watching, his leg pressed to Hitoshi's, no sign of impatience.

He gathers his thoughts, which feels something like gathering armfuls of squirming kittens. He's still all over the place. The first argument that comes to mind is the more superficial one; the safer, more logical one.

"It's about how my quirk would be received. Something that sounds villainous just… it makes people uneasy. It opens up all kinds of doors for bad press, or slander, and rumors—"

He's not making himself very clear. His feelings obscure everything, tangled up like spaghetti noodles. All the scenarios in which misuse of his quirk — even *allegations* of misuse — could spell the end of his reputation or career. If he'd ever had heroic aspirations, they'd all ended after that first, horrible comment:

"Man, Shinsou, with a quirk like yours you could make someone do anything.*"*

"It's… it's just a bad idea."

Katsuki looks unimpressed. "So?" It's like he hasn't heard Hitoshi at all.

"'So', what?"

"So what about any rumors? People say dumb fuckin' shit about

heroes all the time."

"It isn't the 'dumb' shit I'm worried about," Hitoshi says, beginning to feel annoyed. "If people start saying I'm a mind-controlling freak who uses his powers to take advantage of people—"

Katsuki cuts him off. "They're not gonna say that. And even if they did, so fuckin' what? Ain't gonna amount to nothing if there's no proof, and there won't be if you didn't fuckin' do it. There's all kinds of protocols and documentation shit that goes into hero work so people can't just slander their way into a damn payday." Sharp red eyes survey him, then narrow in a frown. "You gave up on becoming a hero because of *that?"*

The accusation spears him. "I—"

The words die. He doesn't even know what to say. In less than thirty seconds it seems Katsuki has revealed his fears as so many paper tigers, leaving him feeling weak and foolish.

But.

With that kind of power, you could do whatever you wanted.

Sounds criminal.

Oooh, that's such a freaky ability!

All the jokes from people he thought were friends. Being accused of stealing someone's lunch money. Having the finger pointed at him more than once, just because he seemed *villainous.* The tigers are real. He's felt the sharpness of their teeth, and that was just high school. In the real world, accusations don't get dropped like so much meaningless gossip. It could ruin him.

Katsuki doesn't understand. He hasn't *been* Hitoshi.

At ease, his boyfriend lolls on the sofa, flippant and uncaring. "Whatever it is, fuck it. If you wanna be a fuckin' hero, you should just do it."

His insides are cold. "It's not that simple."

"Yeah, it fuckin' is." Bakugou's lip curls. "But, if worryin' about the shit people *might* say is all it took to stop you, maybe you ain't cut out to be a hero. There's a lot of fuckin' bullshit—"

He gets up. Katsuki sits up straighter on the couch, but Hitoshi doesn't look at him. His backpack is in Katsuki's bedroom, his coat by the door. He's grabbing it off the hook when a hand touches his shoulder.

"Oi, what are you—"

Hitoshi shrugs the hand off. "Gotta get going. Forgot to feed Bagheera."

"The fuck? Hitoshi—"

He stuffs his feet into his shoes, jamming the tongues uncomfortably low. Whatever. He's out the door without a backward glance, unlocking his bicycle, and pedaling toward the road before he realizes he's forgotten his hat. Fuck it. The wind's bite is chilly, but he can scarcely feel it. Not over the burning in his chest. It hurts. It hurts.

It hurts.

He calls out of work the next day.

Actually, what he does is text Izuku that same Monday night.

Not feeling very well, don't think I can come in tomorrow.

Oh, okay! Sorry you're feeling bad :(Hope you feel better!

Then, grudgingly, he'd texted Bakugou the same message. All it would take is one gruff "where the fuck is Eyebags" for Izuku to know something's up between them. Hitoshi doesn't want that. He likes Izuku, but the guy wouldn't hesitate to probe for answers, and right now Hitoshi just wants to be left alone.

He silences his phone for the rest of the evening.

The day after that, another callout.

Izuku empathizes. Katsuki says nothing. He hasn't tried to message Hitoshi at all, a fact for which he can't decide if he's grateful or pissed off by. He's trending toward pissed off.

He really should do something useful with his time off, so he tries to

channel his anger into planning his future.

Of course, thinking about his future just leads him right back to his argument with Bakugou, pissing him off further. So instead, he seeks out Denki and persuades him to partake in a few rounds of Mortal Kombat. It's only when his eyes are burning with exhaustion around two a.m. that he finally turns in, hoping the fatigue will prevent him from overthinking.

It doesn't.

He tosses and turns, replaying the conversation over and over. Each time he feels angrier. What does Bakugou know? He hasn't been Hitoshi. He's got the kind of flashy quirk that people admire, and must've received concordant praise from the moment it appeared. Where else could such steely self-confidence — or is it narcissism? Sometimes Hitoshi really isn't sure — come from? How could he ever know what it's like to be feared just because you *exist?*

He stews in his anger and eventually falls asleep. By the time he wakes, he finally has to admit it to himself:

Bakugou *was* right.

God fucking dammit.

He calls out one more day.

I think I'm at the tail end of it, just don't want you guys catching it, he sends off.

Then, he's got another twenty-four hours (more or less) to knit together the tattered remains of his pride. Maybe he shouldn't bother. It's just going to be torn to shreds anyway the moment he shows up and has to grovel. That is, if he still has a job.

If he still has a *boyfriend.*

Bakugou still hasn't messaged him. Then again, Hitoshi hasn't messaged him either, aside from calling out.

God, he fucking hates this.

You were right.

How the fuck is he going to look Bakugou in the eye and say that?

He doesn't know. He really doesn't know.

Hitoshi goes to work.

The click of his bicycle lock sounds like an iron latch slamming shut. The scrape of Bakugou's shoes on the pavement like the heavy footsteps of an executioner. He lets Hitoshi in without a word.

This is one of Izuku's late days. Fuck. He should've planned this better.

The silence of the morning is somehow even worse than being barked at. He'd take that vein-popping, red-faced fury over Bakugou's quiet, curt directions any day. The space between them is a cold vacuum through which he wades neck-deep, drowning in his own insecurities.

He doesn't say anything.

He's a fucking coward.

When Izuku arrives, he's a ray of sunshine in the gloom. "Hey, Shinsou! Feeling better today?"

"Some," he says, see-sawing a hand. It's actually a good thing he hasn't spoken until now; his hoarseness plays right into the lie.

"Well, if you start feeling bad or want to go home early, just let me know!"

Izuku's warmth thaws some of the chill. He makes polite conversation, drawing Hitoshi out of his silence, but Bakugou remains quiet. Hitoshi knows Izuku's noticed. There's a faint frown on his face, and he darts quick glances between them. When Iida and Kirishima arrive, Hitoshi is thankful. They flood the room with life, and Bakugou becomes more animated the closer it gets toward the lunch rush. Things are almost normal.

With customers there, it *is* normal.

He finishes out the day. He's done it.

Hitoshi drags the trash around to the dumpster, relieved to escape the renewed deep freeze now that the rush is over. A second pair of footsteps echoes his.

"Is Kacchan okay?"

It's Izuku.

Hitoshi doesn't know what to say to him. The problem between them is just that: *their* problem. Telling Izuku feels wrong.

"Um… I'm not sure."

Izuku does not let up. "Did something happen?"

Hitoshi squirms. "Kind of?"

Izuku just stares at him with those wide, green eyes.

He breaks. Within ten minutes, Izuku knows everything.

"Kacchan…" He sighs. This is becoming a familiar tone.

"It's not his fault," Hitoshi says quickly. "It's mine. I never told him what it was like for me growing up. He didn't know."

"I know. It's just that… Kacchan *really* needs to learn tact."

Hitoshi can agree with that. "Yeah. But it isn't all on him."

"No, it isn't. But I don't think you would've been so upset if he had taken the time to speak more kindly."

"No offense, but I don't know if it's possible for him to *do* 'kindly'."

Another sigh. "Sometimes I think that too. Do you want me to talk to him for you?"

That is exactly the opposite of what he wants. "No, but thanks. I gotta straighten this out on my own. I just need a little more time to clear my head."

Izuku nods. They go back inside.

Hitoshi does feel better having talked to him. Unfortunately, feeling

better doesn't equate to courage. The urge to reach out to Bakugou is not as strong as the urge to get on his bike and pedal home.

He does not apologize that evening.

It takes two more excruciating days before he finally breaks.

He'd hoped that the awkwardness between them would wane as time passed. Nope. Instead it gets *worse.* It's so bad that even Eijirou has picked up on it; oblivious, sunshine-boy Eijirou, who is only diverted from making one of his usual indelicate observations by Izuku's quick wit.

They close. Hitoshi makes to leave, like normal, but pedals his bike around the other side of the building and waits for Bakugou to lock up. Then, once Bakugou disappears up the street, he takes an alternate route.

Up one street, then the next. Along the shoulder of the back roads, sweating and downshifting gears as he struggles up the hills leading to Bakugou's apartment. By the time he arrives, a light in Bakugou's window is on.

He stands outside the door, catching his breath. Even once he does, the instant he lifts his hand to knock his heart takes off again, fluttering like a panicked animal.

He knocks.

Bakugou answers within seconds. He steps aside to let Hitoshi in, and Hitoshi enters, resisting the urge to take off his shoes. He has never felt more like a trespasser.

He turns to Bakugou. Looks into those vibrant red eyes, and then away. It's like looking into the sun.

"Bakugou," he begins, but—

"Take off your damn shoes," Bakugou interrupts gruffly.

Hitoshi does. They fit neatly on the mud mat next to Bakugou's, as they always have. He faces Bakugou again.

“I’m sorry.”

He did it. He got the words out. But there's no relief. Not with the silence twisting tighter and tighter, a garrote strung around his throat.

"The hell are you apologizing for?'

…*What?*

Bakugou is frowning.

"Um… for walking out on you?" He’s severely confused. He doesn't get why Bakugou doesn't seem to expect the apology.

"Tch." Bakugou clicks his tongue. "I pissed you off. Ain't surprising that you walked out on me."

What. The. *Hell* is going on?

"Aren't you mad at me?"

"Nope. But you're fuckin' pissed at *me."*

"I'm really not."

It feels good to see some of his confusion reflected in Bakugou's eyes.

"I was," he amends, "but I got over that after about a day once I realized you were right."

"Huh?"

He almost wants to laugh. This situation is so absurd. That old saying really *is* right; assuming makes an *ass* out of…

"You were right," Hitoshi says again. "About me not being cut out to be a hero."

Bakugou's expression pinches. "That's not what I—"

But Hitoshi holds up a staying hand. "I know. You mean heroes need to have thick skin, and I don't. Not about this, at least. But you didn't know that, because I never told you about it."

He smiles, remembering the night on the roof. "Well, I guess I told you

a little. But I didn't tell you enough. My quirk is kind of a sore spot for me."

"You don't fuckin' say."

And just like that, the walls crumble. Hitoshi aches to reach out, but holds himself back. He doesn't know how Bakugou feels.

"So that's why I'm here. To say sorry for flipping out and for putting you in a bind by calling out of work. Uh…" He rubs his neck. "And, I get if you don't feel like talking to me or... want to break up or whatever."

Just saying the words makes his stomach clench. But he has to say them.

Bakugou's frown disappears. "I ain't gonna break up with you, Jesus."

The room swims. He’s weak-kneed with relief.

"Alright."

Bakugou takes a step toward him. Hitoshi moves closer automatically. Inside he vibrates like a plucked string; a seismograph, attuned to each tectonic footfall.

"I should be the one sayin' sorry," Bakugou mutters quietly.

"Why?"

"Cuz I knew the shit about your quirk bugged you but I kept talkin' anyway."

"Did you know how much it bothered me?"

"No, but—"

"Then it's not your fault." He takes another step closer. He aches to be touched.

"Still shouldn't have done it."

"I guess you can remember that for next time."

Bakugou looks at him, fierce honesty blossoming in his red, red eyes. "Ain't gonna make the same fuckin' mistake."

"Good. I won't either."

He reaches for Bakugou, who reaches out faster, pulling them together. They kiss in the genkan.

The last of the pain fades away.

Later, soft and sated in Katsuki's bed, Hitoshi tells him everything. *Everything.* Right down to his darkest, most irrational fear: that simply using his quirk will tempt him to the villainy everyone's always spoken about.

It's surprising how much it still hurts. Perhaps instead of fading, his memories had aged in silence, growing rich and complex.

Katsuki, shirtless and bite-marked, listens.

"Your classmates were fuckin' assholes," is the first thing he says when Hitoshi is finished.

Hitoshi snorts. *Pot, meet kettle?* "You can say that again."

"They were fuckin' assholes. If I'd have heard that shit I'd have blasted their damn faces off."

"I have no doubt that you would've. And then you'd be in prison, and where would that leave us?"

A warm arm curls around his waist. It's Katsuki cuddled up to his chest this time, and Hitoshi is on top of the world.

They remain like that long enough that Hitoshi's eyelids begin to slip shut. Tired. Too much emotional whiplash for one day, thank you. But he's still curious.

"Do you really think I could be a hero?"

Katsuki's eyelashes tickle his skin with each blink. Once, then twice.

"Yeah. No fuckin' doubt."

It feels good to hear him say it, even if Hitoshi can't quite believe it.

“That’s one reason I was pissed.”

“Hm?”

“When we were talking before. I was pissed that you’d given up without even fuckin’ trying. Cuz I’ve been there and I *know* what it takes, which is why I know you could fuckin’ do it.”

Huh. Righteous anger. Should it feel good to be on the receiving end of that?

“Really?”

“Yeah. Seemed like not doin’ it was a waste. Someone like you… you can do the shit that I can’t.”

The tension is winding itself up the span of muscle beneath Hitoshi’s arm. He gives Katsuki a proper look. Wide, glassy eyes, distant as a lunar satellite. So there *was* more to it; seems like both of them could do with a bit of disclosure.

“You mean… is this about your quirk?”

A nod.

The thought strikes like lightning. Katsuki’s scars. The carpal tunnel. Had it…? “Did you lose the ability to use it after your surgeries?”

Katsuki shakes his head. “Naw. Nothing like that.”

“Then what?”

There’s a long, thoughtful silence. Like Katsuki is planning what to say next. When he sits up, it’s so sudden that Hitoshi is momentarily alarmed.

“I wanna show you.”

“Show… me?”

“Yeah. Get dressed, then go get your bike.”

Puzzled, he does. He’s outside fumbling to get his key in the lock when Katsuki emerges, wearing something very strange on his arms. Some *things*.

“Are those watermelons?” he asks.

Katsuki makes a strangled sound. “Fuck no! Does this look like a watermelon to you?”

He gestures, pointing to silvery attachments that curve out from the back of what must be gauntlets, and Hitoshi finally gets it. They’re hand grenades. Whoops.

“Yeah, a little. Round, green… you know.”

Katsuki bumps him with one. “You need to get your fuckin’ eyes checked.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Now, what exactly am I doing with my bike?”

“C’mon.”

Katsuki leads him down the street to the mouth of another, which sits at the crest of the hill. He points down the straightaway. “We’re gonna race.”

Surely he’s misheard.

“Did you say *race?*”

“Yeah, did I fuckin’ stutter?”

“No, but…” Hitoshi looks doubtfully at his bike. He’s going to be on *wheels* for fuck’s sake, how is that any kind of fair?

Katsuki jerks his chin up. "Don't get cocky before we've even started. Bottom of the hill, on my start."

Oooookay.

They wait for the single car trundling up the hill to pass. When it's gone, the street is free and clear, a long sweep of unlit pavement. It's by the light of a bright gibbous moon that Hitoshi watches his boyfriend eye the road, leaning on the balls of his feet; a man ready to spring.

"Three…"

Hitoshi shifts his weight onto his bike, clenching the handlebar brake.

"Two…"

Katsuki has both hands directed behind him.

"One…"

His foot is on the pedal.

"Go!"

He goes. One hard shove of his toes and gravity snatches him. His tires click. A cool wind lifts his hair, heavy with the smell of damp spring earth. He casts a glance over his shoulder to see that Katsuki hasn't even moved; he's receding yards and yards over the span of seconds, smaller and smaller as Hitoshi's speed increases—

He turns forward. The second he does, there's a crack and thunderous *boom*.

He looks.

Katsuki *flies*.

Another flash and boom. Katsuki soars in a long arc, trailing smoke darker than the night. Another boom. He comes astride Hitoshi, shot like a quiver from a bow. Limned in silver, Hitoshi has one second to make out the wild expression of fierce joy on his face before light blossoms from his palms and smoke obscures him.

Hitoshi's front tire wobbles dangerously. He turns his gaze back to the road just in time to dodge a pothole. Bending over the handlebars, he muscles into top speed, chasing Katsuki's shadow. Wind roars in his ears. He's giddy with speed and terror; at this velocity, one wrong move will smear him all over the side of the hill — but he's flying. *They're* flying.

Katsuki reaches the hill's bottom seconds before him. Hitoshi whizzes by just as another resounding boom cracks out against the pavement. Katsuki lands. Stumbles, arms windmilling, but doesn't fall.

He banks his speed in a turn up an adjacent street and circles back to his boyfriend, who is shaking out his wrists and wincing.

"Fuckin' rusty," Katsuki grouses. "Been too damn long."

Hitoshi brakes next to him. He can only marvel. He had never thought — never even *dreamed* of what Katsuki could do.

"Well, you still won."

A sharp grin. "Told ya not to get cocky. Even gave you a head start."

He's smugly pleased, preening. Hitoshi can't even be angry. He's too amazed.

"You're incredible," Hitoshi tells him.

He can't be sure, but he thinks there might be a blush rising in Katsuki's cheeks.

"Don't go gettin' all moony on me."

Hitoshi kisses him and almost falls off his bike. Katsuki props him up. What starts as a quick peck quickly devolves when Katsuki nibbles on his lower lip. Hunger yawns in his belly. There beneath the weak buzz of the street light, his world shifts.

Someone driving by honks.

They flip off the car simultaneously without looking, though Hitoshi can feel Katsuki's grin against his lips. He loves him a little more for that.

They walk, hand-in-hand — Hitoshi, pushing his bike — back up the hill.

"Could you like… sit on the handlebars E.T.-style and blast us back up?'

"No, and I ain't gonna fuckin' try."

“So, you showed me.”

Back inside, Katsuki is packing his grenade-gauntlets into a padded case. He grunts. “Yup.”

“... What was I supposed to see?”

He had thought this was about why Katsuki *couldn’t* use his quirk anymore. It sure seems functional to Hitoshi.

“Nothin’. The problem ain’t visible from the outside.”

Katsuki tucks the case on a closet shelf. He joins Hitoshi who is sitting

on the bed, but instead of dragging him down for a cuddle Katsuki just sits there, staring at his hands.

Hitoshi waits.

"It was during my third year of school that I started gettin' carpal tunnel a lot," Katsuki says finally. "Had the surgeries after about a year when nothin' was helping, but I kept having pain. Got some x-rays that showed I was gettin' bone spurs in some of my knuckles n' the joint spaces were gettin' narrow."

He turns his hand over, flexing it. "They told me it was probably post-traumatic arthritis from repeated quirk use."

His hands. Short-clipped nails and cuticles reddened from picking. A burn healing on one finger. They look perfectly normal to Hitoshi's eyes… until he looks. *Really* looks. He had never noticed how knob-like each of Katsuki's knuckles are until this very moment.

"Tried a couple different things. Icing my hands every night. Daily anti-inflammatory meds, which only fucked up my stomach. Injections to stop it from getting worse. Finally had to have surgery on my right thumb to replace the joint about two years into my career."

He shows Hitoshi his palm, pointing to a thickened crease at the base of his thumb that Hitoshi hadn't noticed.

"They told me if I kept up the way I was going, I'd either not be able to use my hands by the time I was thirty, or I'd have mostly prosthetic joints."

His eyes are far, far away.

"I don't really care about bionics n' shit, but the arthritis fucks with your nerves too, and they can't fix that. They'd either be too damaged for my fingers to work or I'd have to have fully bionic hands, which means my quirk is fucked."

He shows Hitoshi his palm again. "I got explosive sweat, only on my palms. Can't fuckin' sweat if my hands are prosthetic, though."

"So you had to give it up."

Katsuki snorts. It's the bitterest sound Hitoshi has ever heard.

"Yeah. Either I keep my hands and don't use my quirk, or I use my

quirk and eventually lose it *and* my hands. Not much of a fuckin' choice."

There's resignation there. An ancient well of untapped pain. Hitoshi yearns to comfort him, but something tells him not to. There's a steely edge beneath the bitterness; that vast, fierce pride that is the cornerstone of Katsuki's personality. He doesn't want Hitoshi's pity.

"No," Hitoshi agrees. "Not much of a choice. And so you decided to run a diner instead."

"Damn straight."

He has to ask. "Why?"

Katsuki stares him straight in the eye. "Cuz it's *mine*."

That damn possessiveness. It sends a hot thrill down Hitoshi's spine. "Oh?"

"Fuck yeah. My diner, my rules. I serve what I want, when I want, how I want. If people don't like it, they can fuck off. And I'm damn good at it."

"You are," Hitoshi agrees. He's mesmerized. He doesn't think he'll ever forget the sheer awe of Katsuki in flight, but he won't forget this either; the man sitting next to him in bed, blazing like the sun. He's unconquerable.

"What about me?" he finds himself asking.

Wine-red eyes hold him. "What about you?"

"Am I yours too?"

Katsuki has him flat on the mattress before he can blink.

He receives his answer in the minutes that follow, pressed into his skin by teeth and tongue, written in scarlet lines across his back. He comes with Katsuki's name on his lips.

Later, drowsy and soft in a warm welter of blankets, he seeks Katsuki's

hands. Finds them. Traces his fingers blindly across the dips and curves of bone.

“Do they still hurt?”

Silence. Katsuki’s breaths are slow and even against his cheek.

“All the fuckin’ time.”

The next day, he can tell.

Though Katsuki betrays no obvious pain, the corners of his mouth are tight. He stops chopping once or twice to press his hands flat on the countertop, as if stretching them. He catches Hitoshi looking.

Before Hitoshi can even ask, he mutters, “Went overboard yesterday, now I’m paying the fuckin’ price. Don’t worry about it.”

He tries not to. He really does.

He fails.

His worry changes nothing.

It’s Katsuki’s birthday.

Almost a week to the day from their first fight, he spends the day with his boyfriend. Mostly in bed.

“Happy Birthday,” Hitoshi purrs, trying to look seductive as he slides down his pants.

Bakugou cups him through his jockstrap. “This my gift?”

“It can be if you want it to be.” He turns and bends over, showing Katsuki the jeweled end of the plug nestled inside him. “But I was thinking you might like this more.”

Katsuki taps the red jewel. The sensation reverberates through him, and he shivers.

"When did ya get this?"

"Oh… you know. Some time ago."

Meaning: three days ago, at the same time Katsuki's *real* birthday present had arrived. Thank God for two-day guaranteed shipping.

Katsuki snags the edge of the plug and draws it out slowly. Hitoshi holds his breath. The drag is such a strange feeling. When it's gone he feels loose and empty, clenching on nothing.

Katsuki's thumbs spread him open.

"Look at ya." His breath puffs against Hitoshi's asshole. "So fuckin' ready for me."

And then he puts his tongue to work. Within minutes Hitoshi is sweating and shuddering, ready to fucking hump the mattress if Katsuki doesn't get *in* him.

"And you call *me* a damn tease," he grits out.

With a wet sound, Katsuki surfaces. "You want me to fuck you that bad, huh?"

"No, I want to die of a blood clot in my dick."

A swat to one cheek.

"Fuckin' impatient."

The bed dips as Katsuki shifts off it, digs the lube out of the nightstand, and returns. A brittle click as he pops the lube's cap. Hitoshi spreads himself eagerly, and Katsuki swears.

"God, you look so fuckin' good—"

He's a talker, but that's okay. It gives Hitoshi something to focus on; his mind seems to be tuning in and out of focus like a bad radio. He wants.

No.

They've blazed past *want* about five stops ago. He *needs.*

Katsuki sinks inside. Hilts himself in one slow, steady glide, and the fullness cuts through the white static into sharp clarity.

Katsuki waits. He's trying to be nice, kneading thumbs into the small of Hitoshi's back to give him time to adjust, but screw that. Hitoshi jerks his hips forward, then back, and Katsuki swears again.

"*Fuck me,"* Hitoshi demands, giving Katsuki his best bedroom eyes.

Katsuki does.

Endless pleasurable minutes later, they bathe together. He rubs soap over Katsuki's back and enjoys the warm torpor creeping over him as Katsuki returns the favor.

He lathers shampoo into Katsuki's hair. One pass, nails scratching gently through coarse, water-matted locks, then another to rinse them. Katsuki leans into his touch, eyelids fluttering.

Hitoshi leads his drowsy boyfriend from the bath and helps towel him off. Runs him haphazardly through their evening ablutions — yes, *their,* Hitoshi now has a toothbrush residing in Katsuki's bathroom — and then leads him back to bed.

He digs into his backpack before Katsuki can turn out the light and presents him with a crinkled package.

"Your birthday present."

"You mean *that* wasn't it?"

Katsuki gestures to the plug now lying on the floor.

"Part of it."

Hitoshi holds his tongue as Katsuki rips through the plastic. The excuses roil behind his teeth.

I didn't know if you had something like this already—

If you don't want it, the receipt is there to exchange it—

Just thought you might find it useful—

He's nervous. This is a test: can he find a gift that his boyfriend likes?

Katsuki pulls them out of the bag. Turns the black fleece over in his hands, looks at the tag, squishes the gel inserts between his fingers.

"This'll be a hell of a lot easier to use than frozen peas," is the first thing he says. Hitoshi's insides uncurl.

"You can use them?"

"Hell yeah."

He rips the plastic tag off the therapeutic mittens. Hitoshi helps him slip the inserts into place and then shoves the mittens into the freezer.

When he returns to bed, Katsuki pulls him down and kisses him senseless.

Katsuki's birthday is the high point. After that, the rest is the month is waiting for graduation.

He doesn't think about what comes after.

He doesn't think about it, at least until he has to return his books to the library.

A queer melancholy settles over him as he beats the familiar track on campus for the last time. There is the building he took most of his classes in. Here is the library desk he'd spent so many weeknights hunched over whenever Denki wanted privacy. The quiet sanctity of this place is what he'll miss most.

He dumps his books into the return bin, then heads out.

Hitoshi doesn't look back when the last building disappears from view.

His stomach twinges queerly all the same. He has never thought about what inevitability feels like, but this must be a taste of it. It feels like saying goodbye.

He arrives on Katsuki's doorstep later that evening.

Katsuki welcomes him into his arms, his bed, and finally into himself.

"So… Jirou and I are going to look at apartments in Musutafu this weekend."

Hitoshi looks up from his phone. He's been expecting this. It's kind of a miracle they hadn't spoken about it already; they transitioned to a month-to-month lease when so many other students had already started moving out. Guess he's not the only one who's having trouble deciding his future.

Denki has his eyes fixed on the TV instead of Hitoshi, thumbs working the controller. He's trying to play cool, but Hitoshi can tell he's nervous.

"Yeah? You two finally going to move in together?"

"I hope so."

On screen his character unloads ammo into a swarm of enemies. Red fountains across the screen as the monsters die in excessively gory explosions.

"I was planning on proposing to her after graduation."

Denki says it in such a rush that it takes Hitoshi a few seconds to parse. He grins and kicks Denki’s back lightly.

“Yeesh, finally. She’s only been waiting, what — three years?”

He and Jirou have been dating for almost four years; nearly their

whole college career. About time he moved forward

“You can't count the first two years in that! We were still figuring stuff out!"

"Uh-huh."

“Besides, she didn’t want to get married until after we’re done with school, and I’m pretty sure she wants to be engaged for a year before a wedding anyway—”

Hitoshi nudges him with a toe. “I know. I’m just giving you shit. Congrats, Denks. I’m happy for you.”

Denki’s grin is distracted. “Thanks.”

He’s still holding something back, but Hitoshi knows it’s coming. Denki has always worn his heart on his sleeve. As expected, after another few furious seconds of animated gore, he punches the pause button and turns to face Hitoshi.

“Will you help me record it? I know both our families are going to be there but I’d like someone to know it’s going to happen — if you could take a picture or get a video that would be awesome.”

His voice is soft, as shy as the faint smile that graces his lips then. “I wanna see it again after. Think I’m going to be too nervous to pay attention to anything except making sure I put it on the right finger.”

Warmth settles in Hitoshi’s chest.

“You got it.”

“Thanks, man.” Denki’s smile is open relief. The same sunshine-boy cheer Hitoshi has always known. “You know... if you wanted me to, I could talk to Jirou about having a roommate. I dunno your plans, but if you want to get out of here after our month is up, I bet she’d be cool with it.”

Somehow, Hitoshi thinks she’d infinitely prefer no roommate. “Thanks, but I think I’m good.”

The game is unpaused. Denki goes back to his slaughter, now seeming at ease.

“Well, if you change your mind, let me know. I figured you’d probably

end up moving in with your boyfriend anyway."

Hitoshi blinks.

Oh.

"How would you feel about having a roommate?" Hitoshi asks casually.

Katsuki is not fooled.

"You wanna move in?"

"Well…" He looks pointedly at the cat on Katsuki's lap. "Doesn't have to be *me* who moves in."

They're at Hitoshi's apartment. Jirou and Denki are out for the weekend, staying at Jirou's parent's house while they look at apartments. They have the entire place to themselves.

"That mean you're gonna stay in town?"

"Probably."

Bagheera's eyes are slipping closed. He's angled his head back, the better to accept scritches under his chin. Spoiled brat.

"Thought any more about what you're gonna do?"

He has. Not that he's come up with much.

"Maybe. How do you feel about adding a delivery service to the diner now that you've got an extra hand?" He scoots closer, throwing an arm over Katsuki's shoulder. "Bet you'd make a killing. I know getting yelled at by you is part of the experience and all, but..."

Katsuki pokes him. "Fucker."

"Mmm, that too. Bet you got some unfulfilled delivery-boy fantasies I could satisfy. I'm thinking an order of tortellini soup with *extra* sausage—"

Warm lips silence him. Hitoshi doesn't mind. He's pleasurably distracted by it until Katsuki pushes them apart.

"Smartass," he breathes. "But I ain't gonna let you off the hook yet. You still wanna be a hero?"

Hitoshi freezes, but only for a moment. Katsuki has sprung some version of this question on him over the past several weeks.

"... I'm not sure."

Bagheera's tail thumps his leg. He's displeased by the interruption in his petting. Katsuki begins again.

"That's gonna be my one stipulation. You gotta make up your mind before we move in together. If you don't, I won't ever ask about it again. If you *do*…" His smile is wicked. "You're gonna need someone to whip your ass into shape."

Hitoshi groans. Maybe he doesn't want to be a hero after all.

Graduation.

It feels… surreal.

It also feels *way* too warm.

Hitoshi fans himself with his commencement leaflet. He's sweating in his suit; god, why hadn't he gone for the hakama? He hasn't broken this outfit out in ages, and it feels like someone's replaced it with wool or fucking duct tape, not breathable at all.

The mass of similarly-dressed people pressed around him isn't helping.

There are a couple hundred people here. Their college is mid-sized, nothing compared to the graduating class of Tokyo University — thank *god* — but they're all crammed into an amphitheater that's definitely a bit too small to accommodate them.

Hitoshi does not particularly like graduations.

He sits through this one much like he'd sat through his high school

graduation, playing on his phone until his row is called, then follows the line towards the stage. Denki whoops quietly as he passes. Or maybe he's whooping at Jirou; she and Hitoshi are both in the same row.

He files up. His name is read aloud. There's a sudden burst of sound from the seats; a clamor of voices that he can't pinpoint, not with everything hot and blurry under the bright stage lights, but they sound familiar.

He shakes a hand, receives his diploma holder, and walks off.

And there they are. A pair of frantically-waving hands and a luxurious mane of red hair catches his eye. Kirishima, Izuku, even Iida are halfway up the stands, making a spectacle of themselves (well, at least Izuku and Kirishima are) as they cheer for him, but he has eyes only for the man sitting slouched in a seat beside them.

Katsuki.

Hitoshi nods to him, and receives one in return. His heart soars.

He grins like an idiot all the way back to his seat.

He finds his friends first.

"Fancy seeing you here," he says, a slow grin unfolding. Katsuki looks almost as uncomfortable in slacks as he does.

"What? You told me the fuckin' date and time, you think I wasn't gonna come?"

"Maybe. I'd forgotten that I told you."

Katsuki nudges him with his hip. The pressure remains, a warm point of contact. His friends stand in a semicircle with him, a rock in the tide of people now swirling about them, looking for friends and loved ones.

"We wouldn't miss such an important event as this!" Iida says severely. He's got Hitoshi's diploma holder in his hands, examining the embossed leather.

“Yeah, dude! This is fuckin’ awesome!” Kirishima crows.

At least someone is excited about it. Hitoshi still hasn’t bought into the hype.

“Congratulations, Shinsou.”

Izuku’s green eyes are shining. He’s got the same eager-puppy look as Denki, only… only—

“Fuck!”

They stare at him.

“Uh, I gotta find someone. Hang on a second.”

He finds Denki in time.

Denki is surrounded by an even bigger crowd of people, both his and Jirou’s families taking turns snapping pictures with the new graduates. Even Hitoshi's parents are there, chatting with Denki's father. He sidles up to them, whispers the secret of what's about to transpire, then pushes through the small knot of people surrounding his best friend and soon-to-be fiancée.

His phone is ready when, five minutes later, one of Jirou’s aunts distracts her. Denki reaches into his pocket. He’s down on one knee when she turns back around, beaming that lunatic thousand-watt smile at her.

“Kyouka, will you marry me?”

The spectacle is over. A ring sits sparkling on Jirou's finger, and a small swarm of relatives is crawling all over the new couple, clamoring for pictures. Hitoshi gives Denki a brief thumbs up — *the deed is done* — then chats with his parents, posing grudgingly for pictures when they insist. Over the shoulder of the photo-taker — one

of Denki's uncles — he can see Katsuki snickering. Bastard. It tempts him to take up his parents' offer of lunch out of spite… but of course he won't do that.

"In these crowds?" He fakes a grimace. "The wait everywhere is going to be horrible. How about tomorrow?"

And so Hitoshi, absolutely terrible son that he is, slips neatly out of both lunch and introducing his parents to his boyfriend. Probably a good thing. Bakugou Katsuki is an experience neither of his parents are ready for yet.

They leave. Hitoshi follows, hugs them and waves them off toward the train station, then grins when, as soon as they're out of sight, his hand is seized.

"C'mon." Katsuki tugs hard enough that he stumbles forward.

"That eager to spirit me away, huh?" Hitoshi says, chuckling. The laughter dies in his throat when Katsuki pins him with a look so intense it smolders.

Oh.

They go.

There, Katsuki divests him of his suit and tie between kisses. Then his underwear. He returns the favor, surprised to find a silky black jockstrap beneath Katsuki's slacks.

"What's this?"

"Underwear. What's it fuckin' look like?"

And Katsuki calls *him* a smartass.

The underwear is just the pretty trappings. Beneath he finds what he believes is his graduation gift: a re-gifting of the present he'd given Katsuki for his birthday.

Sultry red eyes peer over one lithe shoulder at him, as bright the matching gem between Katsuki's cheeks.

"Did you wash that?" Hitoshi asks, running a thumb over the jewel's flat face.

"Course I fuckin' washed it. It's been in your ass."

Charming.

But he is charmed. Charmed and more than a little horny, thinking about the fact that Katsuki had sat through his *entire fucking graduation* with Hitoshi's plug up his ass.

Katsuki arches his back, plump buttocks pushed out at him. "You just gonna fuckin' look?"

Oh *hell* no.

Hitoshi hooks fingertips beneath the plug's rim and takes back his present.

After, they settle on the couch hip-to-hip. Two hot bowls of chili sit steaming on the coffee table, courtesy of Katsuki's forethought and crockpot. Before he can dig in, an envelope is shoved into his hand.

He raises an eyebrow, questioning.

Katsuki says nothing.

He opens it.

There's no check or cash. It's a simple congratulatory card, unsigned. But taped within: a key.

"But—" He stares at Katsuki. "I thought you said I had to make up my mind first?"

"Yeah, well, maybe I fuckin' lied."

Katsuki looks like he's trying very hard not to smile. He's failing. He's obviously pleased as punch to have surprised Hitoshi.

Hitoshi isn't pleased. 'Pleased' can't even begin to describe the lightness flooding through him.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Unless you start fuckin' snoring, then I'm kicking your ass ou—"

Hitoshi hug-tackles him right into the couch.

As it turns out, sex and a shiny new apartment key aren't his only gifts.

Katsuki takes him to The Spice Bomb that evening, grousing at the torrent of people milling about the sidewalk. The whole street is filled; celebrating graduates and their families have flooded all the bars and restaurants.

Once Hitoshi opens the door: explosion.

There's a banner, and streamers, a clamor of voices and the savory smell of cooking food, and—

“Congratulations, Shinsou!”

Izuku bounds up to him, beaming as brightly as the summer sun.

In seconds they’re surrounded. All his friends and their significant others, boisterous enough that they seem a crowd ten times as big. Holy shit. It almost makes him feel bad about being so apathetic towards his graduation.

“Fuckin’ Deku.” Katsuki kicks at a sprinkling of gold and blue confetti in the shape of little champagne bottles. “ Going fuckin’ overboard. You’re gonna sweep all this shit up before we open tomorrow!”

He directs the last comment toward Izuku, who only smiles. “Okay, Kacchan!”

The food is as good as it smells. Hitoshi helps himself to a little bit of everything, chatting in between bites. Katsuki is his red-eyed shadow, nibbling at his own food quietly until Mina draws him out with a few well-placed barbs. Hitoshi watches them bicker. He could get used to this.

In lieu of a cake, there is hanami dango. Hitoshi feeds Katsuki one, smirking when this earns a chorus of loud hooting from Kirishima and Mina, and laughing openly at the catcalls he receives when Katsuki feeds him one in return. It’s a testament to how close they’ve all gotten.

The evening spins out, as warm and golden as melted honey. He doubts he'll remember any of the specifics in a year or even a few days, but knows the memory of its sweetness will linger. Him. His friends.

And his lover.

He's drunk on affection when they walk out into the darkness hours later. It's what drives him to tug Katsuki down into the darkness of an alleyway and pin him to the wall, heedless of the distant rumble of thunder. They kiss. In this midnight hour it is only them.

Then suddenly, it isn't.

Katsuki stiffens. The hairs on Hitoshi's nape prickle, and he turns — too late.

There are two men in the alleyway with them. It's too dark to make out anything but the darkness of their clothes and their general size, but that's enough. They're both older and bigger than Hitoshi and Katsuki, and blocking the only way out. They're trapped.

"Hand over your wallets."

The shorter of the two men speaks. He's carrying a knife. It's the only bright thing in this shadowy place between buildings, glinting silver in the weak light from the street.

Hitoshi's brain has frozen.

Katsuki stirs behind him. The sound unsticks something in his mind, and suddenly his thoughts are racing. He can see everything with perfect clarity.

Katsuki. The former hero. A coiled tiger at Hitoshi's back, ready to spring. He's going to throw himself at the muggers the instant there's an opening and then it'll be all over, only—

"Do they still hurt?"

Only he'll pay for it.

Hitoshi steps forward.

"Hey, fellas," he says, slick as a politician. He can't even feel his mouth moving. "What're you planning on doing with that?"

He points to the knife.

“Shut up,” the bigger one says.

Thank god. Thank fucking God *it was the bigger one*.

Hitoshi hooks him as the shorter man steps forward. From this position, Knife Guy can’t see his friend go slack and vacant; he’s too focused on brandishing his weapon at them. Perfect.

“Tackle him, will you?” Hitoshi says.

Knife Guy scowls. “The fuck are you—” And then he’s plowed face-first into the pavement when Big Guy rugby-tackles him from behind. His knife goes skittering away.

Katsuki darts forward, kicking the knife even further out of reach. He stomps a foot down on a flailing hand.

“You fuckin’ bastard,” he says in a tone that is flat and cold, and utterly remorseless. “I’m gonna kill you.”

And it sounds like he really does mean it, so Hitoshi stops him with a hand on his shoulder. “Hang on. Just call the cops, I’ll use the big guy to keep him down, alright?”

Slowly the murder drains out of Katsuki’s eyes.

“Fine.”

Hitoshi has the bigger man pin the other while Katsuki dials the police. In minutes a squad car comes trundling down the street and Hitoshi flags it down, leading the officers to the place Katsuki waits with the two muggers.

“Put your hands behind your back,” Hitoshi tells the bigger man, then severs his hold as soon as the cuffs snap closed.

The two are led away. One of the cops sticks around to take a report from them.

“You did this?”

The cop raises bushy eyebrows at him, and for the first time Hitoshi realizes that he may have fucked up. Civilians aren’t supposed to take the law into their own hands. Surely it’s a case of self-defense, though? The guy had a knife!

“Uh, yeah.”

The cop scrawls something on his notepad, but says nothing else about it. He ends up letting them go with a copy of their case number and the promise to follow up if any more of their testimony is needed for court, then leaves.

Katsuki’s arm is tight around his waist. It’s only when they've made it blocks away that Hitoshi realizes he’s shaking.

“Fuck,” he breathes, looking at his trembling hands. Whatever adrenaline high he’s been riding has gone out like the tide. “What the fuck.”

They could’ve been hurt. They could’ve fucking *died* if his ploy hadn’t worked. What the hell was he *thinking?*

Katsuki’s hand finds his, squeezing too tightly. Hitoshi squeezes back. The pressure gives him something to focus on instead of diving down the winding rabbit-holes of potential tragedy.

Rain sprinkles his hair. Bakugou opens an umbrella, feeble protection against a spring storm. By the time they're back it's become a proper downpour; they race inside, shucking wet layers off hastily in the genkan before detouring straight for bed. There they curl in on each other, arms and legs tangled like brambled vines.

Hitoshi pets Katsuki’s back fitfully. It’s like he has to keep reminding himself that they’re both there and whole.

“You did real good,” Katsuki mumbles into his hair.

“Hm?”

“What you did back there. You got a hero’s instincts.”

Hitoshi nuzzles against Katsuki’s collarbone. He doesn’t feel particularly heroic right now. Mostly just lucky. “Yes, I very heroically didn’t piss myself. Guess it’s lucky they fell for my half-assed trap."

Katsuki stills. "It ain't luck."

"If you say so."

His face is dragged out of Katsuki's chest. He's held firmly but gently, forced to look into those vibrant red eyes.

"I mean it. Wasn't fuckin' luck that you did what you did."

"Yeah, but I wasn't exactly planning it either. I almost started babbling about the weather, if you'd believe it. I bet you could've taken them down in two seconds flat."

"Probably. But it ain't about what I can do, it's about what *you* did."

Hitoshi gets what he's doing. Katsuki is about as subtle as a brick to the face, as usual.

"I stopped us from being mugged. That's it," he says. "It's not like I stopped some wannabe-Godzilla on a rampage or saved a bus full of children or anything. That doesn't make me a hero."

"Did I fuckin' say it does?"

Katsuki sounds annoyed. Hitoshi knows it's his fault, he's being an obstinate little shit, but he wants Katsuki to get *his* point.

"No. But this one thing doesn't mean I have what it takes to be a hero. Hell, even if I *did* become one all it'll take is one deaf or mute villain and then I'm fucked—"

He shuts up abruptly. Katsuki's face is suddenly *there*, an inch from his, and he looks *pissed*.

"Don't fuckin' talk like that."

Hitoshi blinks.

"Told you already, you don't know shit about what it takes to be a hero, but I do. And if I'm sayin' you got what it takes to be one, you *do*. "

He's kissed then, savagely enough that his lips sting.

"So don't fuckin' talk yourself down, Hitoshi. You're better than that. Everyone fuckin' knows it, so it's about damn time you start believing it." Katsuki's eyes soften. "Cuz *I* believe it, and I don't back shitty fuckin' extras."

Hitoshi stares at him. Then he grins.

"Wow. Didn't think you did motivational speeches."

Katsuki doesn't bite. "I wanna hear you say it."

“Say what?”

A warm mouth approaches his, ticklish as lips ghost across his own. “You can be a hero.”

The urge to joke is strong. He almost throws that exact phrase right back at Katsuki, but knows Katsuki would see it for the pathetic smokescreen that it is.

A hot tongue swipes his mouth. Hitoshi opens to welcome it inside, but Katsuki doesn’t give him that escape. Iron fingers hold him tantalizingly out of reach. So near that they’re sharing the same air, but so far that the millimeters feel like miles.

He takes a deep breath.

“I can be a hero.”

Something so simple, but it feels like disgorging a mountain. The weight is gone. Katsuki is smirking at him, pleased, but Hitoshi isn’t finished. Now that he’s said it he can’t stop.

“I want to be a hero.” He wiggles and claws his way up until he’s straddled in Katsuki's lap. “Will you train me?”

“You bet your fuckin’ ass I will.”

Anxiety and excitement make a potent combination. It’s like someone’s dumped pure adrenaline straight into his veins; no jitters, no fear, all one sweet electric high.

They make love then. A messy, feral affair; Katsuki’s devotion is fierce and all-consuming, marked into Hitoshi’s skin and soul for all to see. Hitoshi opens himself to it. There are no secrets between them anymore; doubtless Katsuki has known about it for a long, long time.

He says the words anyway.

Katsuki says them back.

“You’re going to be a hero?”

Izuku's eyes are bright, sparkling emeralds. Kirishima whoops. Iida nods in approval.

"That's awesome, dude!"

"Work hard, Shinsou! I'm certain you will succeed!"

"Well, I'm going to apply, anyway," Hitoshi says, embarrassed but pleased by their enthusiasm. "Don't know if I'll get through the entrance exam, but I'll be working hard for these next few months."

"Damn straight you will," Katsuki says loudly.

"Do you want to join me for my morning workouts?" Izuku says, bouncing in his excitement. "The gym is really cool, Mr. Yagi lets me use all the crossfit stuff, and there's ropes, and tires—

"*I'm* gonna be fuckin' training him, nerd!"

"Are you really flipping tires and stuff with that hand?" Hitoshi asks, mildly concerned.

Katsuki snorts. "He's been doing that shit for months. Ain't no fuckin' physical therapy, just this asshole's excuse to bail to the damn gym."

Hitoshi blinks. Izuku looks chagrined.

And that's how he learns that Izuku has *actually* been training to apply to UA's graduate course.

April

It's a celebration, and a goodbye.

Hitoshi and Katsuki are out to dinner with Jirou and Denki. It's the last week of their lease, and the apartment is already empty. They're both moved out.

"You better visit!" Denki says, threatening him with a chicken wing. "We live just a couple blocks from this really cool bar, it's got all these old school arcade games and stuff—"

"And there's a pretty nice museum," Jirou adds.

He promises to visit. They both will. Musutafu is an hour by train; not a bad weekend trip.

Denki's eyes are overly bright when they say goodbye.

"Hit me up anytime, Hito."

"Same, Denks."

He watches his best friend walk away, and again that queer sense of inevitably steals over him. But this won't be the end. It's just a series of new beginnings.

Katsuki takes his hand and leads him home.

End Notes

Good fucking *Lord* this story got away from me. These idiots took their sweet time getting together, but I can see why they fit :'3
Happy holidays, y'all!

Feel free to say hi to me on the bird app
p.s. you said I could make this all one chapter so I did

Also, if you haven't checked out theeggoman's fanart, you should go check it out!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!